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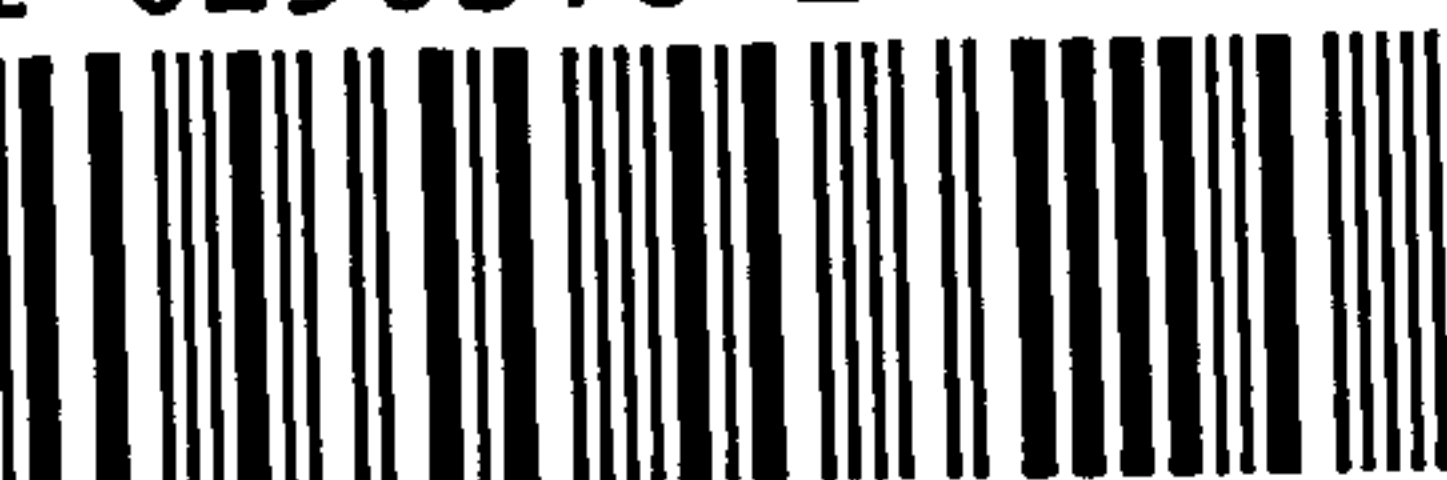
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Women Alone

A socio-psychological investigation

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IN

ORIGINAL

ABSTRACT

Women alone: a socio-psychological investigation

In this thesis I investigate different meanings of singleness as understood by women who are alone. Using data from interviews with 30 women aged 30 to 60 years, I examine how women work with a single identity in a social context that is changing rapidly. I focus on identity and self-representation through looking at discourse, and the discursive and conversational moves made by participants. My project is interdisciplinary in nature, benefiting from developments in sociology and psychology in an applied social science approach.

My analysis draws on critical discursive psychology, and makes additional use of traditions in narrative analysis and conversation analysis. Examination of how participants talked about themselves and singleness shows linked but distinctive forms of 'trouble'. The culturally available and familiar resources for understanding singleness are highly polarised, and participants demonstrated rhetorical work in weaving their ways through the extreme contrasts of a denigrated or an empowered identity. The cultural context incorporates new representations of singleness while continuing to offer continuity with older, more devalued notions. I argue that these polarised ways of thinking create a troubled identity for single women.

Telling the story of her life and relationships also presents trouble for the woman alone. The familiar and dominant cultural storylines of western society are of committed heterosexual relationships and ensuing family life. Such resources for telling a life story were at the same time useful and troublesome as participants positioned themselves in comparison with, and at times resisted the familiar storyline. Furthermore, representing themselves as possessing agency and having made choices in their lives was problematic for participants. I also focus in a more detailed way on some patterns of troubled interaction in the interview itself, and consider the relationship of interactions in the interview to broader issues of stigma and social exclusion.

Previously published work

Some of the discussion on theoretical commitments that guided my research (in the Introduction to the thesis), and much of the data and discussion in Chapter 4, have appeared in the publication Reynolds, J. and Wetherell, M. (2003) 'The discursive climate of singleness: the consequences for women's negotiation of a single identity', *Feminism & Psychology*, 13(4): 489–510. The data selection and analysis is my independent contribution.

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INTRODUCTION

Introduction

By the year 2020, we are told, one in three of us will be living alone.

One in three. That amounts to more than a trend. It's a massive shift in social behaviour. Solitaryness is emerging from being regarded as something abnormal into being a norm.

(Young, 1997)

Welcome to the Singles Century. By 2010, almost half the population will be unmarried and, according to a recent survey, half the people still getting married are thinking about getting divorced as they sidle down the aisle.

The rise of the single person is the greatest social phenomenon of our time. Britain already has the highest proportion of single-parent households in Europe (one in four). Bachelors under 30 are the fastest-growing social group. Everything, from the family to the high street, the tourist industry to the television, has been altered by the new demographic.

In this week's magazine, we celebrate the single life. For the first time, being single is a proactive lifestyle choice, like the car you drive, the food you eat, or the books you read. People are no longer willing to settle for settling down. The single stigma has faded away (the more there are, the less likely they are to be pitied). Friends are the new family.

(Observer, 2000)

For those defenders of singledom ... another American phenomenon has taken off. It's spawned a book and it's called *Quirkyalone: A Manifesto for Uncompromising Romantics*.

...The manifesto? To 'resist the tyranny of coupledness,' because being alone is preferable to counting the days in a 'stifling or unsatisfying romantic relationship.' *Quirkyalones*, says Cogen, are: 'Independent-thinking people who would prefer to be open to finding that magical click.'

(Wood, 2004)

Single-person households will be predominant in Britain by 2010, but starkly split along gender lines.

'There is a growing segregation between the lives of single men and women' said Richard Scase, visiting professor at the Institute for Social and Economic Research at the University of Essex, author of the report. 'Thirty and forty-something single women have well-developed social networks, and are involved in a wide range of social and other activities,' he said. 'Men, on the other hand, appear to be sad, isolated, lonely cases. The hard truth seems to be that living alone is good for women, but bad for men.'

(Reeves, 1999)

The selection of quotations above, taken from articles in British newspapers in recent years, gives some flavour of new ways of thinking about singleness in response to the apparent rise in single person households. Singleness is good for women, but not for men, we are told. Being single is now a 'proactive lifestyle choice', no longer something stigmatised or abnormal. For women at least singleness is portrayed as uniformly positive, with notions of stigma portrayed as something from the past. There is an assumption that single people are living outside 'normal' family life, although some of the statistics quoted include single parent households. Living outside of a partnership and living alone (while

still open to ‘finding that magical click’) are seen as the same thing. These quotations exemplify some current ways of talking about singleness.

The implication is that singleness, or perhaps the discourse about singleness, has changed from a stigmatised lifestyle to a lifestyle of choice. In this thesis I investigate different meanings of singleness as understood by women who are alone. I examine how women work with a single identity in a social context that is changing rapidly. My work is located in the applied social sciences; it is interdisciplinary in nature and draws on sociology and psychology. Charting change and the movement of discursive history is relevant to my project. However, my main focus in this thesis is on identity and self-representation. To anticipate my conclusions, examination of how the women in my study talked about themselves and singleness shows linked but distinctive forms of ‘trouble’. The culturally available and familiar resources for understanding singleness are highly polarised, and participants demonstrated rhetorical work in weaving their ways through the extreme contrasts of a denigrated or an empowered identity. I argue that the cultural context incorporates new representations of singleness while continuing to offer continuity with older, more devalued notions. These polarised ways of thinking create a troubled identity for single women.

In this introduction to the thesis I explore the context of the quotations above concerning singleness as a positive lifestyle choice. I consider changing practices and recent theorising on relationships and the family. I suggest that women who are on their own present an essential yet neglected area for further study. I discuss how I developed my ideas for a research project and I outline and explain my own approach to understanding singleness, which emphasises its socially constructed nature and uses variants of discursive psychology. Finally I give an overview of the chapters in this work.

Changing practices in relationships

As the quotations above claim, there are shifts in social behaviour and in the numbers getting married, divorced, living together and remaining single. However, these changing practices also mean it is difficult to get precise figures on how many women might be

considered to be single. It is possible to compare recent figures of married or single women (defined legally as 'never-married') with earlier ones: these provide one kind of snapshot. Between 1979 and 2002, the proportion of women in Great Britain aged 18 to 49 who were married declined from nearly three quarters (74%) to a half (49%). In contrast, over the same period, the proportion of single women in this age group doubled from 18% to 38% (National Statistics, 2004, p. 7). However, these figures do not show changes in cohabitation or include the divorced.

Figures on cohabitation (living with a partner) give a different kind of snapshot. In the same period, 1979 to 2002, the number of non-married cohabiting women between 18 and 49 rose from 11% to 29%. Looking simply at those who were 'legally single' (never having married), but who were cohabiting, the figures are more dramatic, almost quadrupling from 8% to 31% (National Statistics, 2004, p. 8). Among non-married people (including those who were separated) aged 16 to 59 in 2002, a quarter of both men and women were cohabiting (National Statistics, 2004, p. 56).

Information from the 2001 Census shows that 30% (6.5 million) of the 21,660,475 households in England and Wales were one-person households: an increase from 26.3% in 1991. However, of these, nearly half were one-pensioner only households, and three-quarters of these (2,366,000) were occupied by a woman on her own. In contrast, in the remaining 3,376,000 one-person households, male occupants outnumber women by three to two. This suggests that some caution is needed in assuming that the biggest increase in numbers of women living alone is due to lifestyle choice: a large proportion of the increase is due to older women living on their own following the death of a partner. However, commenting on the Department of Environment's (1995) Projections of Household in England to 2016, Scase notes that by 2010 single person households will become the predominant household type in Britain, accounting for almost 40% of households. This increase will be more pronounced among those of younger middle age, and more middle-aged people will live alone not only because of divorce and break-ups, but also from personal choice, predicts Scase (Scase, 2000, p. 24).

There are fewer married women than in the past, and correspondingly more women who remain single in the legal sense of not being married; there are also more women who are in a cohabiting relationship who account for a significant proportion of the higher number of single women. Census and General Household Survey figures cannot give information on more complex forms of relationship where a household is not shared. What is clear from the changes in marriage, divorce and cohabitation figures is that there are many dimensions to singleness, and that it is increasingly the case that most women experience periods of living alone at different stages in their adult lives.

Difficulty in interpreting figures on singleness stems from the changing cultural definitions of who is single. These definitions in turn reflect the changing social context. There is, of course, one meaning of 'single' in the sense of categories in relation to legal marital status: here it means 'never-married' and contrasts with other non-married categories of widowed, divorced and separated. However, for purposes of research or popular writing on singleness, at different periods 'a single woman' has been taken to mean: chaste, never-married and childless (Hillis, 1936); or to include the divorced and widowed, but not lesbians (whether or not they are in a couple relationship) or parents (Adams, 1976); or to include all of these categories but not those currently in cohabiting relationships (Gordon, 1994). 'Otherness' and systems of difference are important in language and semiotic systems for constructing identity. What these varying definitions have in common is that they are formed by stating what the single woman is not: not sexual, not married, not a parent, not living with a partner. Over time, the definition of singleness appears to be expanding to cover previously excluded categories, although some recently emerging work returns to a focus on single women who are 'never-married' and not currently in a cohabiting relationship (Byrne, 2000; Simpson, 2003).

The question of cohabitation is an interesting one: it is a category that can include single people (meaning not legally married), although most researchers on singleness would see cohabitation as similar enough to marriage to wish to exclude those living in cohabitation from their studies. In contrast there are also partnerships that do not involve cohabitation.

These include divorced men or women with offspring who choose not to cohabit again until the children have grown up (Williams, 2004). Couples who do not share a home, but who consider themselves to be partners, have been referred to in *The Observer Magazine* as 'semi-detached' couples. 'They may be around the-block-a-few-times couples, busy career builders, single parents or just highly independent types' (Rice, 2002). They may also live and work in different places, and see each other at weekends or for holidays. 'Typically, they maintain separate households, separate bank accounts and have separate as well as joint friends, but consider their semi-detached relationship to be exclusive and their priority' (Rice, 2002). Such blurring of definitions of partnership makes problematic any common-sense categorisations of those who might be considered single and those who might not.

Another aspect to singleness is that of age. Is singleness age-related, and if so, how do the parameters of singleness work? Is a 14 year old single? Probably not in most people's everyday understanding, being below the age of consent, but what about a 16 year old? What about an 85 year old whose husband has just died? Or a woman of 70 years who has recently divorced? Is there a 'proper' age for being single, and is this notion linked to expectations of marriage or partnership?

A number of social theorists have provided analyses of the changing practices in contemporary relationships. Writing of the German context, Ulrick Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (1995) argue that in the current 'New Era' there is a collision of interests between love, the family and personal freedom (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, p. 1). They diagnose that the nuclear family, built around gender status, is falling apart on issues of emancipation and equal rights. In Germany, as in the UK, single person households are growing in number – one in three at the time *The Normal Chaos of Love* was written (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). However, rather than seeing a single lifestyle as replacing the nuclear family, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim predict that the next incarnation will be the negotiated and multiple family, the result of new and complex arrangements after divorces.

There are, of course, questions as to why what might appear to be personal matters and decisions should take on such 'epidemic' proportions (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, p. 4). Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's theory is that *individualisation* is driving these changes. Each historical period creates particular types of people, and in this current period needing to 'become what one is is the hallmark' (Bauman, 2001, p. xv). Human 'identity' is no longer a 'given' but a 'task' (Bauman, 2001). 'The ethic of individual self-fulfilment and achievement is the most powerful current in modern society' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001, p. 22). This possibility of leading a life of one's own emerges when a society is highly differentiated, so that people are integrated into society only in their partial aspects as taxpayers, car drivers, patients, mothers, sisters, pedestrians and so on (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001). Beck and Beck-Gernsheim refer to a shift from family interests to individual interests as the primary drive for decision making. In the current climate, it is argued, individualisation opens up all decisions for personal choice and people have to take over responsibility for themselves, instead of relying on the overriding interests of the marriage. According to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim these changes are not comfortable. While there is freedom from the traditional gender roles of industrial society, men and women are forced to fit in with the needs of the labour market, at the cost of their commitments to family, relations and friends. Freedom is only relative, since the demands of the labour market and the demands of relationships are in conflict.

Anthony Giddens (1992) also theorises a relationship and sexual revolution. He traces the breaking of the connection of sexuality from its association with integration, reproduction, kinship and the different generations. He provides a new term, 'plastic sexuality', to describe this independent sexuality, freed from the needs of reproduction. According to Giddens, the availability of reliable contraception has brought about a revolution in female sexual autonomy and undermined the overweening importance of male sexual experience. In Giddens' view, ordinary women as well as feminist thinkers have pioneered a move away from an ideal of romantic love, based on the primacy of the marital relationship as a lasting shared commitment. In its place is an ideal of 'confluent love', based on equality in emotional give and take and an expectation that the relationship will only last as long as it

is satisfying to both participants. Now that more women are able to work and are no longer confined to the home, and as a result of the pressure from feminists, they expect more equal relationships that have to be worked at constantly and negotiated. The result, rather than the cause, argues Giddens, is the separating and divorcing society of today. Giddens draws extensively on self-help literature to illustrate and support his argument. In a 'portfolio of rough sketches' Bauman (2003) takes up some of the implications from Giddens' work. He describes a world of rampant individualisation, where relationships are a mixed blessing (Bauman, 2003). Relationships, argues Bauman, are nevertheless seen as the central medium for satisfaction, all the more in so far as they have been found unsatisfactory to date. At the same time, we experience contradictory and forceful drives for freedom as well as a craving for belonging. Loose and revocable relationships have replaced the model of 'till death us do part'. Commitment is to be avoided: instead people like to 'see how things go' in their relationships. Like Giddens, Bauman draws on popular psychology for his evidence, but in his work the psychological view is mediated through the columns of *The Guardian Weekend*.

Central to all these portrayals of the current social context surrounding relationships are arguments concerning the changes brought about by industrialisation and the changing expectations of women. Beck-Gernsheim (1998) sketches a pre-industrial form of relationship that centred on work and economics, where families had common goals and activities were closely co-ordinated with each other. In contrast, she says, industrialisation meant that it was men who chiefly had a relationship with the labour market, while women remained on the whole dependent on men's earnings. However this changed with the advent of the welfare state which allowed for a minimum existence for individuals beyond that supported by family income. For women, argues Beck-Gernsheim, the ties to the family have loosened as a result of improved contraception, the impact of more equal opportunities in education on young women's ambition and increased opportunities for women to work. For the first time, women are not dependent on marriage for economic security. They can choose: 'perhaps not altogether freely but more than before, whether

they really want to marry or to stay single, and whether to seek a divorce rather than put up with endless conflicts if the marriage does not turn out as they hoped' (Beck-Gernsheim, 1998, p. 59).

From these analyses, it would seem likely that women who have chosen to stay single or to divorce are in the vanguard of social change. It might be expected, and the newspaper reports quoted earlier suggest, that the single woman is now positioned as a powerful player who can negotiate for relationships that meet her needs. However, there are different strands to social change that suggest other outcomes, for instance the feminisation of poverty, that places some women 'only a husband away from welfare', or the loneliness of the professional woman (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). Oppressive poverty, or the lack of time for leisure pursuits can both leave single women stranded and disengaged from the relationships game. Single women negotiate their relationships in a context that still carries strong patriarchal expectations for women of a continuing relationship (Bickerton, 1983; Rosa, 1994), and heteronormative assumptions that this will be with a man.

Single women are a crucial group for study in relation to the perceived changes in family life and relationships, and yet their experiences and situations have not attracted detailed attention from social theorists. One reason for this is that interest has often centred on what is happening to 'the family' and 'marriage' or 'relationships', and on building a picture of normality in relation to these different institutions. In constructing normality, it is often the case that groups that do not fit the image of normality (single persons, the childless) are screened out (Beck-Gernsheim, 1998, p. 55). Yet women on their own are an important test case for claims about social change.

Feminist theorising has influenced the developing analyses of the changing social context discussed above, and this is explicitly or implicitly acknowledged, although the roots and sources are not always traced in detail. Feminist practice in the latter half of the twentieth century, together with media images and popular forums for discussion of 'women's liberation' has also contributed to the object of scrutiny – social change. Thus feminists at

the same time developed the tools for analysis and set in motion the changes. Singleness is an important topic for feminism: however it is a topic that has also remained at the margins of feminist theorising. While feminism has drawn attention to the possibilities for women to live independently of men and actively shape their own lives, much of the debate has focused on the imbalance of power in relationships between men and women (Greer, 1971; Dowling, 1982; Hite, 1993). Theorising on what Adrienne Rich (1980) called 'compulsory heterosexuality' has been a significant challenge to the terms of the debate. However, what seems to be compulsory is not just heterosexuality but long-term partnerships of any sort within a marriage or cohabitation (Rosa, 1994). There has been little sustained analysis of the marginalisation of women who live alone without a long-term intimate partnership with another adult. While not all women who are alone would consider themselves to be feminists, it is likely that a better understanding of this group will have important lessons for feminism.

Developing a research project

My initial interest in singleness was because of my own experience of over twenty years of living alone without a long-term partner, following the break-up of my marriage when I was just twenty-five. I had not expected to be on my own for so long, and found it hard to explain this to others and to myself. I wondered whether any of the sexual relationships that I had over the course of this period of time really 'counted' as relationships, since none of them had led to long-term commitment or living together.

An episode that brought my ageing single state home to me was when I was offered the opportunity to join the academic pension fund with my new contract as a part-time temporary lecturer. The adviser from the financial section was probably surprised as I tried to hide my tears when she explained my options. It seemed I would never qualify for a full pension however much I put into the superannuation scheme, as I had left it too late. This was not in itself a cause for distress: when I was younger I had always cashed in my superannuation on leaving jobs, and used it to go off travelling the world, without a thought for my needs in older age. Yet at 40 years, it suddenly seemed a dreadful plight, to

have no one on whom I could depend financially in retirement, no certainty that I would be able to continue to find employment in an academic world, and no prospect even if I did of ever amassing a 'proper' income.

When my grandmother (born in 1880) and her husband separated she was in her late forties. She had her sixteen-year old daughter, my mother, with her, and she later lived with my parents all their married life. She had no state pension entitlement, and until her 80s no source of income other than my parents' support. She never spoke of her husband, other than stories of his early courtship. I only learnt of the rift as an adult when I found some private papers and asked my mother what had happened. I was brought up with the understanding that my grandmother was a widow, an assumption probably held by most that had only known her after my grandfather's death. 'What would people think?', was a common injunction from my grandmother throughout my childhood and early adult life. My mother was widowed at 57 years. For brief periods before my marriage, and when it ended, we formed a matriarchal household with three generations of 'women alone' together.

My own experience of 'aloneness' came at an earlier age than it did for my mother and grandmother. Most of the time I was not unhappy, and I had a strong network of friends and an active social life. Yet it seemed to me that the kind of experiences that I and other single friends had were not well represented in the media and that there was little public awareness or understanding of the lives of single women.

I was drawn to the idea of 'giving voice' to women's experience. However, as I explored the literature I recognised that there was no shortage of accounts of the experience of women on their own, yet these under-theorised thematic accounts added little to knowledge and understanding. Where single women were dealt with more systematically in the academic literature the focus was on their potential problems. Studies recounted women's sense of hurt and loss in 'aloneness'. This was not the focus I wanted for my work.

The most promising theoretical insights came from Adams (1976), whose work points to the social construction of singleness, and the results for those who are living lives that run

counter to public understandings of femaleness and femininity. She argues that psychological theory is used to define singleness – essentially a social situation – in terms of deviance and deficiency. Her innovative work does not appear to have been built upon and developed by later authors in an effective way. As I searched for useable theory to examine the social construction of singleness, I saw the need for some exploration of discourses: regimes of talking about singleness. It seemed that the available ways of representing singleness will shape what women on their own can do, and how they make sense, and talk about what they do. These discourses may well constrain the possibilities for a sense of identity that emphasises positive aspects of singleness.

What I seek to develop in this work is a feminist discursive analysis of ‘singleness’. Several theoretical commitments have guided my empirical research, and I outline them here (Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003). These commitments consist of five linked claims about ‘singleness’ and follow variants of discursive psychology, and social constructionist thinking about identity issues in social psychology (see Wetherell, 1998).

First, I suggest that the single state is best viewed as socially constructed. Theories of social construction collapse distinctions between material existence, social relations and systems of meaning. Foucault, for instance, argues that nothing has any meaning outside of discourse (Foucault, 1972). Of course there are things that have a natural existence in the world, but it takes the system of representation that is involved in discourse to give them meaning.

This notion brings into sharp relief the shifting patterns of meaning through which singleness has been understood historically as well as the changing pattern of social arrangements and social practices for regulating relationships. It is a reminder that singleness, like marriage, is not a ‘natural’ fact or a natural social arrangement. It highlights the historically and culturally variable status of singleness. Consider the contrast, for instance, between the quotations at the beginning of this chapter, highlighting post-millennium celebration of the single life as proactive lifestyle choice and the extract below from an advice book from an ‘unmarried woman doctor’ looking at ‘love

and life' in the 1950s:

The unmarried woman has to face up to herself and her life. She's got to stop expecting life to be fair. Life isn't meant to be that way at all. Life doesn't owe her a handsome adoring husband and two beautiful children full of bright sayings – life owes her nothing. She has to reorganize her thinking so that she can be grateful for the good things that happen to her and work her way through the bad things without a sense of defeat.

This is the bitter, desperate adjustment that the single woman has to make. Nothing will again be as painful as the moment she realizes that she will live all her life alone; no moment will ever hurt so much.

(Hilliard, 1956, 1960, pp. 68–69)

At an empirical level, this shifting social appraisal draws attention to the relativity of current relational forms. It raises questions about the other ways relationships might be constructed and why some particular modes and representations of the single state dominate social organisation now.

Second, singleness is a social category. I understand categories and categorisation, however, from a discursive rather than a cognitive perspective (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Edwards, 1997). As Harvey Sacks has argued, categorisation-in-use is revealing about social order (Sacks, 1992). Sacks has drawn attention, for instance, to the ways in which common understandings of singleness as age-related work in everyday conversational practices to produce the category of 'unmarried': 'When persons 25 years old say in assessing themselves that they're unmarried, they're told. "No, you can't say that yet."' (Sacks, 1992, p. 68 vol 1). Such responses suggest that there is indeed a recognisable age at which it is 'proper' to consider oneself as unmarried.

Categorisation practices and the flexible resources these provide for constructing relationships and events at any given moment (single versus married; cohabiting versus married; living alone versus cohabiting; spinster versus bachelor; parent versus childless; wife versus mistress and so on) help provide an orderly and accountable framework in social life. The use of categories suggests an order for that moment. Categories give different opportunities for drawing contrasts. Difference can also become hidden when categories are conflated together within an overall category framework. The category single can be worked through many different category contrasts, and constructions of 'otherness' and 'sameness', 'outsider status' and 'insider status', to produce a wide range of

accounts and evaluations (Hester and Eglin, 1997). The question then arises, among all the possibilities, why are some repeated over and over?

Much of the literature treats the categorisation of singleness as a natural, rather than socially constructed, phenomenon. Questions of meaning often concern finding the *correct* definition. Does the category just include the 'never married' (Allen, 1989; Peterson, 1981) or what some call the 'ever single' (Reilly, 1996) or does it extend to the divorced, the separated and the widowed, those who are 'single again', and those who live in long-term partnerships but are not married? In contrast to debates on who is *really* single, my interest is in how the category is constituted at different historical moments and in different interactional contexts. I want to re-focus research, therefore, on 'how' the social category of singleness is constructed rather than 'who' really is a member. How do the methods of categorisation work and what are the institutional and identity consequences and implications of different formulations?

My third broad premise is that singleness should be studied not just as socially constructed and as a social category but also as a discourse. Discourse constructs the way of thinking or the state of knowledge about a topic at a given time. Singleness is a set of complex meanings and practices. The *discourse of singleness* produces knowledge, forms of truth and expertise (see Hall, 1997). To speak about singleness is to speak in relation to this discourse. Stuart Hall has helpfully summarised Foucault's discussion of what is included in the study of discourse (Hall, 1997b, pp. 45–46), and I have adapted his summary below to apply to single women:

1. Statements about 'singleness' or 'aloneness' which give us a certain kind of knowledge about these things, and the ways in which this knowledge works to regulate conduct.
2. Rules which prescribe certain ways of talking about these topics and exclude other ways – governing what is 'sayable' or 'thinkable' about singleness at a particular moment. What such rules expose about the workings and effects of power.
3. 'Subjects' who in some way personify the discourse – the lonely spinster, the swinger, the available woman, the social network activist, the dangerous divorcée, the family

helper, the fiercely independent battler – and particular attributes we would expect these subjects to have, given the way knowledge is constructed about the topic at the time.

4. That this knowledge acquires authority and embodies the ‘truth’ about the topic at a historical moment, with ‘truth effects’ for those who live in this category. Some ways of living are considered normal and unexceptional, while others require accounting for.
5. Practices within institutions for dealing with the single. For example, an insistence that women should specify their marital status in all sorts of ordinary interactions such as placing an order with a shop, or making a dental appointment; routine expectations that husbands or partners are included in social invitations; a courtesy title of Mrs extended to women attending hospital appointments – single women’s conduct being regulated and organised according to those ideas.
6. Acknowledgement that a different discourse will arise at a later historical moment supplanting the existing one – opening up a new *discursive formation* and producing in turn new conceptions of singleness, with new authority to regulate social practices in new ways.

The last point is an important point for Foucault. Discourse is historicised, and things only have meaning within a specific historical context. As I have already noted, singleness is not an objective fact that is the same in all historical periods. Only within a definite discursive location can singleness appear as a meaningful construct (see Weedon, 1987).

One of the puzzles of Foucault’s formulation is how the discourse changes – what opens up the way for a new discourse to supplant an old one? Although Foucault (Foucault, 1980) rejected the term ideology, in my view it is also helpful to see singleness as an ‘ideological field’, following the definition of ideology suggested by Billig which sees the processes of everyday thinking and talking as processes of ideology (Billig, 1991; see also Wetherell and Potter, 1992). The ideological field of everyday talk is a patchwork of contradictory possibilities, and speakers encounter dilemmas in trying to reconcile the different implications. If we see the processes of everyday talk as processes of ideology, then we

must recognise that speakers are at the same time in charge of the language they select, and limited by its possibilities (Billig, 1991). This allows single women some agency in influencing and shaping the discourse.

Both the terms 'discourse' and 'ideological field' stress that the shifting patterns of meaning which construct singleness are formed in relation to power. Singleness is a discourse regulating conduct. Discourse explains the working of power on behalf of specialist interests, and it can be used to analyse the opportunities for resistance to it. At the level of the individual it offers an explanation of where our experience comes from – we draw on the discourse to give shape to our experience – and why it is contradictory, or incoherent, and why and how it can change (Weedon, 1987). I would expect to find that singleness is a discourse which naturalises and pathologises, creates patches of visibility and patches of invisibility and mystifies some forms of being while normalising other forms. I anticipate that it is likely to be an ideological field organised through commonplaces, tropes and dilemmas, a highly variable and inconsistent patchwork of representation (see Billig *et al.*, 1988; Wetherell and Potter, 1992).

My fourth proposal is that singleness needs to be studied as a set of personal narratives and subject positions (Davies and Harré, 1990; Riessman, 1993). Social history, social practices and the ideological field around singleness construct different cultural slots and sets of identity possibilities. They are possibilities rather than a fixed and static model of identity controlled by an ideological field. The process of living in these slots and living with these possibilities (working with them, complying, resisting and transforming them) becomes a personal identity project for the individual single woman. In developing narratives and accounts of themselves, and in making sense of their lives and life choices, people work up the discursive resources available as identity. Indeed, narratives are a way of managing identity in a shifting, fragmented and complex ideological field. In this respect categorisation practices and the discursive field of singleness produce a psychology and modes of subjectivity.

Identity is a negotiated performance. I am interested in the everyday ways in which

women who are alone make sense of their situations in talk and conversation. In line with previous research in discursive psychology (Marshall and Wetherell, 1989; Wetherell and Potter, 1992), I would expect that their accounts will be highly variable, the identity positions developed will be distributed and multiple and the contradictions and inconsistencies will be informative about the constitution of the discursive field of singleness as a whole. I would also expect some continuity in the ways that women understand 'singleness', and that it should be possible to find some patterns within and between accounts. I assume that identity is 'precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak' (Weedon, 1987, p. 33). The immediate situation and local context of each conversation will shape the way in which identity is performed.

As well as mapping these fragmented patterns, and discussing their psychological implications, I also aim from a feminist perspective to critically evaluate the kinds of identity resources on offer to women to negotiate their identity projects. *My final guiding principle, therefore, is that singleness is not just socially constructed, a social category, a discourse and a set of personal narratives and subject positions, singleness should also be a politics.* In other words, it is an arena in which feminists need to develop further strategies of resistance and develop a collective voice which might help women position themselves in much more enabling ways.

In the rest of the thesis I explain and justify in more detail the theoretical commitments that I have outlined above. I turn now to briefly introduce the kind of empirical work that I chose to do in the light of my thinking about singleness.

I have several reasons for focusing solely on women rather than including men who are on their own. Singleness is generally acknowledged to be a gendered category that works differently for men and for women (Greer, 1971; Adams, 1976; Dowling, 1982; Faludi, 1992; Gordon, 1994). As a feminist, I want to work with categories defined by women, for women (Cline, 1993). There are arguments for working comparatively across genders, especially in the light of claims that living alone is 'bad for men' and makes them sad

(Scase, 2000). There may be some shifts in contrasts in the discursive context, but in this thesis I will argue that the canonical images of lonely spinsters and eligible bachelors remain alongside some newer images of socially active women as compared with sad, isolated men. Detailed attention to the discursive climate for single women, which is different to that for men, is a legitimate task in itself. Moreover, although there have been some attempts to work comparatively in relation to singleness (Wile, 1940; Stein, 1976; 1981a), most of this work is now out of print, and does not form a good basis for new work. There is a tradition in the main bodies of work on singleness of focusing on single women (Bickerton, 1983; Jeffreys, 1985; Allen, 1989; Chandler, 1991; Anderson and Stewart, 1994; Clements, 1998), and this is helpful in reviewing the changing meanings of singleness for women. It is important to build upon this tradition, using a feminist perspective and introducing new tools for analysis of the discursive context of singleness. For the purposes of this research project, I have taken an inclusive approach concerning singleness. It is not clear that there is widespread agreement as to whom the label 'single' applies, nor whether further changes may take place. Since my interest is in exploring the different meanings of singleness, I have tried not to narrow down the category in a pre-defined way that might prevent some meanings from emerging. I wanted to see how women work with the idea of 'singleness', and in terms of finding a sample I used the term 'women alone' as a category to include a wide range of women without predetermining whether or not they 'really are' single. I undertook interviews with a total of 30 women. I discuss in more detail in Chapter 3 my decisions on how to generate suitable data, and the style of discourse analysis that I adopted. In brief, my aim has been to treat the interviews as 'discursive events' (Wetherell *et al.*, 2001) which would allow me to explore the range of interpretative resources participants drew on, and the kind of meaning-making that was going on. The analytic approach I have followed is one characteristic of critical discursive psychology (see for instance, Wetherell and Edley, 1999) that blends insights from the ethnomethodological and conversation tradition with those from Foucauldian-inspired concepts of discourse.

The central research questions explored in this thesis are:

- How do women who are on their own make sense of, and talk about, singleness and relationships?
- How do new and different cultural resources interweave with historical discourses of the woman's place?
- How is agency and choice understood by women in relation to their single state? What power relations structure their experience of singleness?
- What kind of collective and personal strategies are there that help women either to fit neatly into the cultural slots for singleness or to put up some resistance to them?
- How do women work rhetorically with stigmatised aspects of singleness?

There are further more detailed research questions stemming from these that drove the analysis for particular data chapters. I introduce these further questions in the relevant chapters.

Chapter overview

Chapters 1 and 2 take different approaches to reviewing relevant literature from the social sciences and self-help books. Chapter 1 examines the continuity of key themes as well as changing meanings in relation to singleness. This exploration of the literature demonstrates aspects of singleness that continue to be treated as problematic, alongside more upbeat notions of independence and autonomy. In working with taken-for-granted understandings of singleness as something to be coped with and risen above, the literature also contributes to the discursive context of singleness. Chapter 2 also reviews literature, this time to examine how identity is theorised in social science literature on singleness. I contrast the models commonly drawn on with the perspective on identity that I aim to develop in this thesis. The existing literature is threaded through with assumptions about subjectivity in relation to singleness. I outline three of these implicit models of identity and critique their usefulness as theoretical frameworks for understanding women alone. I introduce my more reflexive approach to theorising singleness and identity as discursively

constructed. Rather than something fixed, unchanging, and existing prior to social interactions, I understand identity as performed in talk. Identity is shaped by the wider cultural resources available as well as the person's own history and the conversational turns suggested by the immediate situation. In Chapter 3 I discuss different traditions in discourse analysis and explain more about the critical discursive psychology approach that I take. I outline how I went about doing this research project.

The next four chapters set out my data analysis and my findings. In Chapter 4 I look at the broad cultural resources that were commonly drawn upon by participants in my project. The highly contradictory nature of these resources involved participants in rhetorical work to weave their way through the extreme contrasts of a denigrated or empowered identity. As I will argue in Chapter 1, the cultural context incorporates new and positive ways of thinking about singleness while continuing to show continuity with older and more devalued notions. The resulting polarised set of resources, drawn on with regularity by participants, present speakers with various sorts of trouble.

In Chapter 5 I examine in detail how trouble appears in one participant's story of her life and relationships. The dominant cultural storylines of western society are of committed heterosexual relationships and ensuing family life. Participants in my research made many direct and oblique references to the familiar story of lifelong commitment and stages involving the process of family life in talking of their own lives. Such resources for telling a life story were at the same time useful and troublesome as women positioned themselves in comparison with, and at times resisted, the familiar storyline.

Chapter 6 demonstrates the trouble encountered by participants in representing themselves as empowered and self-determining individuals. Different patterns in the ways that participants did this solved some problems for them, but opened up other difficulties. As they moved from one troubled subject position to find another they appeared at times to be dancing between different kinds of identity and storyline for their life decisions.

Chapter 7 focuses in a more detailed way on some patterns of troubled interaction in the interview itself, and considers the relationship of interactions in the interview to broader

issues of stigma and social exclusion. Finally in Chapter 8, 'Reflecting on the discursive climate of singleness' I review the achievements of this thesis, critically discuss the research process and highlight possibilities for further exploration.

CHAPTER 1

The changing meanings of singleness

Introduction

In this chapter I review previous literature on singleness, and in doing so map some continuities and changes in key themes for how singleness has been discussed in recent and in more historical work. In spite of changes in women's lives, in their greater opportunities for economic power and satisfying careers, singleness for women continues to be remarkably resistant to losing an association with a discreditable identity. I suggest that literature on singleness, as well as commenting on how singleness is understood and tracing some of the changes and continuities, also contributes to this discursive context of singleness. Empirical studies, for instance, often move from description of what single women report, to prescriptions for single women. They provide women with instructions for how singleness should be practised. Even work that seeks to celebrate singleness can be seen instead to be mounting a defence for women against the commonplace understandings of singleness as problematic. This chapter and the next are therefore important in exploring some of the broader cultural resources for talking about singleness that women may draw on in their conversations on this topic.

The meaning of 'singleness' is elusive. In the terms of Saussure's theory of language, it is both a 'signifier', that is, a written or spoken image, and a 'signified', the meaning that is attached to the signifier (Saussure, cited in Weedon, 1987, p. 23). The meanings of singleness, or what is being signified, are different at different periods of time. There is no natural or constant connection between the word 'singleness' and the meaning that it conveys: the meanings are socially produced. The signifier 'woman' changes its meaning from 'victim' to 'object of sexual desire', according to its context (Weedon, 1987). In a similar way, 'singleness' has different meanings which offer different subject positions for women, for instance: 'celibate', 'solitary', 'independent', 'desperate for a man' or 'powerful'. Subject positions are the different identities that may be brought into play through different ways of talking (Davies and Harré, 1990; Edley, 2001), and I discuss

these more fully as a tool for analysing my data in Chapter 4. The different subject positions and the meanings conveyed depend on the discursive relations within which singleness is located. Singleness is thus open to constant rereading and reinterpretation.

It is not difficult to see changes over time in the meanings of singleness, and I discussed some of these changes in the Introduction to this thesis. Definitions used for research purposes have expanded from, for instance, referring to those who have never married (Gigy, 1980) to include those who are not currently married or in a similar kind of relationship (Chasteen, 1994). As well as changes in definitions, there are changes in the common representational practices associated with singleness: what it is that is being signified. One of the aims of this thesis is to consider these new and different associations now linked to the category 'single' and their relationship with continuing and more long-standing notions of the single status.

This chapter takes two main approaches to literature on singleness. First, it offers a conventional academic literature review of how singleness has been discussed, indicating some relevant arenas of discussion, describing some key work and gaps in this literature and thereby building up a case (developed further in Chapter 2) for why my own research is needed. Second, it explores how particular themes relating to singleness have occurred and recurred in differing forms over time. This is in order to draw out some of the changing meanings of singleness. The next section introduces the main strands of work on singleness that I draw on in this chapter and the next. The following sections take key recurring themes in this literature and demonstrate changing and enduring meanings attaching to singleness.

Different strands of literature

Writing on singleness has emerged from different academic disciplines and there is also a significant area of work that consists of more journalistic accounts as well as self-help books. Academic interest in singleness includes analyses developed from historical, sociological, psychological and social work or therapeutic perspectives. Perhaps because

singleness is not 'owned' by any particular academic discipline, discussion has been on the whole thin and unsustained, although this could equally well have accounted for a rich interdisciplinary mix. Many of the earlier books are now out of print (for instance, Adams, 1976; Stein, 1976). Recently there has been some sociologically-based as well as more journalistic work from the USA that appears to discover singleness afresh without much acknowledgement of earlier work (see for instance Anderson and Stewart, 1994; Clements, 1998).

The approaches to singleness that I draw on in my discussion are historical work relating to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; literature that aims to give single women a 'voice' through telling their stories; self help books for single women dating from the 1930s onwards; work focusing on the implications for working with single people in therapy; and sociological approaches that undertake a more political examination of the power relations involved in singleness in a patriarchal society. There are some overlapping themes and approaches between what I have identified as different strands, and some of the work I review fits into more than one of these categories. In the rest of this section I describe and discuss the work that I draw on, in order to place it in context.

Historical work

My intention in this chapter is to offer a brief social history of meanings of singleness over time. However, I am not a historian, and my interest in meanings is from a social psychological perspective. I draw on the interpretations of contemporary feminist historians rather than make use of original sources. It is therefore very much a selective social history that appears in this chapter, relying on work that has a particular interest in single women. The two examples of this literature that I discuss in this section were both written in the same period of the mid-1980s. This was a time when feminists were finding a variety of ways to re-evaluate women's role at different historical periods: a feminist agenda was to the fore.

Sheila Jeffreys' work on feminism and sexuality between 1880 and 1930 looks at the under-reported role of single women in campaigning to protect women from the exercise

of harmful male sexuality (Jeffreys, 1985). Jeffreys points out that other aspects of the feminist struggle, such as campaigning for women's right to vote, or to improve women's education and work opportunities, are seen by historians of today as challenging and progressive. She argues that, in contrast, the efforts of the same women to curb men's overweening sexuality for instance through campaigning for legislation on prostitution, incest and rape in marriage have often been seen by historians as backward and retrogressive. In particular, Jeffreys contends that the attack in journals on single women (who defended their right not to have sexual intercourse with men), in the earlier part of the twentieth century, was an attack on lesbians. She makes a strong link between the interests of lesbians and the interests of single women in general: 'When lesbians are stigmatised and reviled, so, also, are all women who live independently of men' (Jeffreys, 1985, p. 100).

Jeffreys recognises the difficulty for feminist historians of today in analysing the language of the 1890s, for instance terms used to describe sexuality, such as 'sexual excess' and 'continence' are not ones that would be used today (p. 27). Similarly, the category 'lesbian' was not accepted in the period before the First World War, and is not the term that would have been used of themselves by these women who drew attention to the differences of interest between men and women over issues of sexuality. Jeffreys' argument is nonetheless contentious. She says that it cannot be assumed that spinsters defending their right not to have sexual intercourse with men were sexually inactive. She claims that the attack on the spinster was also an attack on the lesbian.

Martha Vicinus draws out distinctive aspects of the feminism of the earlier period contrasting it with that of a more recent generation, in her work on independent single women from 1850 to 1920, stating, for example:

Some of us have deliberately chosen separatism from men, while the pioneers were separatists by necessity. They were labeled deviant because they did not marry; in our generation deviancy has been applied to lesbians far more than to single women as a category.

(Vicinus, 1985, p. 8)

Thus, for Vicinus, the category of being single was the critical one for creating deviancy in the late 19th and early 20th century, rather than an association with any presumed sexuality of the early single feminists. Vicinus places the female friendships of the Victorians and Edwardians in the context of the different understandings of the emotions at the time (Vicinus, 1985).

These historical studies offer a fascinating insight into debates of earlier periods. It is hard, however, for any writer to detach their commentary on times past from their viewing point through the lens of current concerns. The interest of the authors in these studies is in examining and at times re-appraising the climate for singleness over the last century or so. My own interest is in looking at the contemporary climate, the resources it offers for talking and thinking about singleness, and where there may be continuities with earlier meanings of singleness. Thus, my aim is to examine in more detail the lens of current concerns. I expect some concerns to work together, as a kind of package with each other, while others, in contrast, are perhaps drawn on in conflict with each other.

Giving voice to singleness

A number of studies aim to give single women a voice or tell their stories (Peterson, 1981; Anderson and Stewart, 1994; Gordon, 1994; Reilly, 1996; Clements, 1998). Tuula Gordon's (1994) study is an example of an empirical social science approach to this. Gordon interviewed 72 women aged 35 and over, in London, San Francisco Bay and Helsinki, including women who lived alone or with others in a range of settings which excluded marital-style cohabitation. Gordon spoke to single women with children, women from a range of ethnic origins, lesbian women as well as heterosexual and disabled women. Unusually in this literature, Gordon is not herself single, which may account for some detachment in her approach alongside the aim of giving voice.

Gordon's analysis and discussion is thematically organised, and much of it remains under-theorised. One area of interest which is insufficiently developed is that of the marginalisation of single women. Gordon comments on the progression in her thinking from a rather simplistic idea of a centre, with those furthest from the centre the most

marginalised. Her more developed perspective is to view margins and centre as existing side by side. Gordon comments that marginality is not necessarily subversive, but may be incorporated, and that if marginality is defined as a challenge to the centre, being what the centre is not, it may strengthen the centre while also contesting it. Gordon recognises that women can move in and out of marginality, be marginal and not-marginal, or define their marginality in different ways. In other words, the discursive context and local conditions can mean variability in how women employ an understanding of marginality. However, in most of her analysis, Gordon does not appear to employ insights in relation to how women themselves construct singleness through their discourse. She tends rather to see women's responses to her questions as direct and quantifiable evidence of their views and beliefs. She works from an assumption that there is a world out there to be captured by her method (see Denzin, 1997). My own aim is to make more use in my analysis of variability and contradiction in participants' talk, as an aid to understanding the discursive climate for singleness.

There is a tendency in most of the thematic analysis that 'gives voice' to focus on one predominant view rather than many voices, thus obscuring points of difference and variability. An example is the sociologically-based work of Carol M. Anderson and Susan Stewart (1994). They talked to approximately 90 women in a midlife range (mostly between 40 and 55 years) who were either never-married, or divorced or widowed. All participants had lived alone for some years or for their adult life, although many of them were in committed relationships. They interviewed a few younger and older women to get a perspective on how women looked back on and anticipated the middle years. The voice that predominates in the text is that of a woman who has not chosen to be single, but nonetheless survives and flourishes without a partner.

While the work does not add significantly to any theoretical debate, it is interesting in demonstrating changing and conflicting representations of singleness. The authors focus on positive examples of single women in 'midlife', 'flying solo' in 'uncharted territory'. They aim to provide models of singleness for other single, and even married women, and

write of challenging the myths concerning the disadvantages of the single life. The book's starting point, which is not explored in depth, is that in popular opinion single women are inevitably unhappy. Anderson and Stewart's work is not unusual in focusing on this taken-for-granted premise, and in producing examples of fulfilled single women to challenge popular opinion. There are a number of academic studies that focus on the incidence of stress or distress among single women, generally finding that there is little to distinguish single women from the general population in relation to life satisfaction (see for instance, Loewenstein *et al.*, 1981; Davies, 1995). Indeed, what would be unusual would be to find a contemporary academic work that argues that single women are, in general, unhappy. (The most recent that I have been able to find is in a work originally published in the 1930s, which discusses different 'solutions' being offered in different countries for problem of the unmarried (Burgess, 1940, pp. 152–153). This is, however, in the context of recognition of sexual need and an expectation at the time of writing that marriage will continue to be the preferred type of sexual relationship.)

Work such as Anderson and Stewart's appears to be based on the belief that by reading about positive examples of women who have 'succeeded' at being single, others will be reassured and inspired. Yet, by challenging ideas of singleness as problematic, authors also privilege such ideas, and give recognition to their force and power. There is a reliance on a simplistic model of social change, which targets the single woman herself as able to resist stigmatising attitudes and change them through her positive approach.

Anderson and Stewart say that they began their project by looking for 'successful' midlife single women, and they assumed that success would be associated with prestigious positions. Instead, they found themselves directed to women who did not match this definition. They changed their preferred participant group to women who 'felt good about themselves and their lives'. This formulation may be responsible for the rather prescriptive tone to the text, which tells single women what they need to do in order to feel good about themselves, drawing on the lessons from the authors' case study style presentation of findings. The approach is relentlessly upbeat, presenting an idealised picture of singleness

for middle aged women, and is permeated with the metaphor of flying, for instance:

Flying solo successfully, they say, is very much a question of attitude. Of course, women do need resources and opportunities, but securing these begins with realizing that they deserve to fly. And while all this is possible earlier in life, it is easier at midlife, as our middle years bring us the confidence and courage many of us need to give our souls the gift of flight.

(Anderson and Stewart, 1994, p. 288)

Following this passage the authors say that how the women in their study arrived at a place of confidence and belief in their own worth boils down to three points:

- Accept who you are
- Dare to dream of a new destination
- Take action.

These instructions, which go far beyond reporting on and discussing research findings, have much in common with the approach taken in self-help literature, which I discuss next.

Self-help literature

It may be unconventional to refer to self-help literature in an academic study, although Giddens (1992) and Bauman (2003) draw extensively on this genre as evidence for changing ideas on intimacy and love. My reasons for including it in this review are that there has been a steady production of self-help literature aimed at single women over the last 70 years, and it gives a flavour of popular conceptions of the issues of the time (Hillis, 1936; Roulston, 1951; Smith, 1952; Hilliard, 1956, 1960; Payne, 1983; Hodgkinson, 1993; Bristow, 2000; Lewis, 2001). The style of self-help literature has also been influential in much of what I have described as the 'giving voice' strand, (see for instance, Anderson and Stewart, 1994), as well as the literature directed at therapists, where some authors cross over from empirical to self-help work (see for instance, Lewis and Moon, 1997; Lewis, 2001).

The two studies that I discuss here as representative of the self-help strand are taken from the contrasting historical periods of the 1930s and the year 2000. Marjorie Hillis (1936) in

her guide for the 'extra woman', *Live Alone and Like it*, aims to address women whether rich or poor and, with a dry wit, sets out a plan for being independent. She writes as a single woman. She assumes that her reader may have chosen to be modern and single, may belong to the army of lonely hearts 'with nobody to love them', or may have a fleeting solitary existence between husbands. The book is introduced by a misogynistic Frank Crowninshield who suggests that a woman who really likes to be alone should take up 'startling social hobbies' such as 'not talking about things she doesn't understand to people who do' (p. xi). This is perhaps a friendly but sardonic jibe at the author, but conveys a view that a positive attitude to being an independent woman alone would not be widely welcomed by men.

Wendy Bristow's (2000) work *Single and Loving it*, advises on how to be happy and whole when there is no other half. She is also single, but after having divorced for the second time. Her assumption is that the reader who is single has arrived there after an ending to a relationship, and the book is divided into three parts to reflect what she sees as phases to singleness – 'recovery from loss, learning to be alone and dating again'.

Hillis is bracing, caustic but funny, commenting on lonely hearts:

This is a group to which no one with any gumption need belong to for more than a couple of weeks, but in which a great many people settle permanently and gloomily.

(Hillis, 1936, pp. 15–16)

Bristow, in contrast, is sympathetic and intense, advising women to recognise their periods of 'longing', whether for a lost love, or a love 'we never seem to find', but ultimately to detach from it so that 'you're in control of it, rather than it controlling you' (p. 178). Both in their different ways are recommending that self-pity be avoided.

Hillis (1936) opens by asking the reader 'Who do you think you are?' and advises that she should stop thinking of herself as pitiable, a widow or a spinster, words 'rapidly becoming extinct'. 'A woman is now a woman, just as a man is a man, and expected to stand on her own feet, as he (supposedly) stands on his.' (Hillis, 1936, p. 26). This lays down a marker for the times for today's reader of the influence of the earlier wave of feminism, changes

resulting from the First World War and the notion of a 'new woman'. Hillis recommends developing a positive mental picture: 'you'll need at least two things: a mental picture of yourself as a gay and independent person, and enough spunk to get the picture across to the other person' (Hillis, 1936, p. 19).

Bristow also asks her reader 'Who are you?', and in keeping with a present-day trend to individualisation and the need to become what one is, advises that 'You can't have an effective, fulfilling relationship with anyone unless you have one with yourself' (2000, p. 105). Again, where Hillis is brisk but mocking, Bristow turns to inner exploration and self-understanding.

What both books have in common is the expectation that finding a relationship with a man is the desired end goal of the reader, however much they put forward strategies for liking or loving the single state. Their advice contains the implicit assumptions that singleness is not the norm, that no one would be single if they could avoid it, and that single women need to act in a way that overcomes other people's hostility or indifference. No one writes advice books with a title such as 'live as a couple and like it'! While there are books offering advice on relationships, the cultural baseline is that living as a couple is what people want to do, and the advice needed is how to do it better. Living alone, in contrast, is not naturally the desired state, but can be turned into a pleasant experience. It involves obstacles to be overcome, requiring determination and an effective strategy.

Singleness and therapy

Recovery from loss is also a strong theme in work that looks at the implications of working with single people in therapeutic or social work encounters. In two examples of this genre that I introduce here and discuss further in Chapter 2, the authors theorise developmental tasks for single people to do (Schwartzberg *et al.*, 1995; Lewis and Moon, 1997). They argue for the importance of an understanding of singleness from therapists for adults who are involved in relationship decision-making and moving in or out of singleness.

Schwartzberg *et al.* write of their clinical practice in family therapy. Lewis and Moon are also family therapists, respectively with backgrounds in social work and psychology, and

did a study based on group interviews with 37 'always single and single again' women aged between 30 and 65, and 39 questionnaire responses from a second set of women. They call their study a multiple-case phenomenological study conducted for the purposes of developing theoretical assertions about the experiences of midlife, single women. Lewis and Moon draw attention to the 'unresolved' ambivalence of women about being single and the simultaneous expressions of contentment and sense of loss from their participants. Both sets of authors note that there is potential for single women to think of themselves as necessarily flawed because they are not married. They comment on the importance of the therapist not participating in the woman's self-blame.

It is interesting to note the extent of therapeutic literature on singleness, and in particular the contribution from family therapists (Bickerton, 1983; Llewelyn and Osborne, 1990; Bankoff, 1994; Schwartzberget *al.*, 1995; Lewis and Moon, 1997; Lewis, 1998; 2000). One aspect of an interest from family therapists in single people may be that with increasing numbers of divorces, they are seeing more families headed by a single parent. They may also see the family that they commenced work with become a divided family, and in time take on work with a single member of the original client family. However, the predominant meaning of singleness that is worked with in this literature is that of the single person as a never-married person. It is not always clear from this therapeutic literature on singleness how far it is directed at a better understanding of a class of people who may appear in therapists' consulting rooms, and how far single people are seen as having an inherently problematic identity, and thus theorised as inevitably in need of therapeutic help.

A common theme in this strand of literature as with many of the others discussed here is of singleness as a *personal* problem. Even the more upbeat and positive texts seem to be responding to, and defending single women from, a consistent thread of singleness as a deficit category. The positive advice to single women from Anderson *et al.* is at the same time shaping, directing, *telling* women what they need to do in order to be single properly. In this sense, the literature forms part of the discursive context of single women. It moves

from description of what single women report, to prescription for single women. It provides women with instructions for how singleness should be practised. What also seems to be happening is a focus on the problems of single women as personal ones, amenable to personal solutions, when in fact there is also evidence from the literature which is pointing strongly to the issues as political and gendered (Bickerton, 1983; Chandler, 1991; Rosa, 1994). The dilemmas are particularly intense in therapeutic encounters where the main tool available is a therapeutic relationship to address personal problems. When Schwartzberg and her colleagues and Lewis and Moon warn therapists against treating single women as flawed because of their single state, they are at the same time constructing a version of the single woman (ambivalent, in mourning) that looks very much like a suitable case for treatment (Reynolds, 2002).

Are there other ways of thinking about singleness that do not keep returning to personal responsibility? Can the cultural context be examined? Some approaches almost verge on denial of this context, treating it as a 'delicate' matter (see Silverman, 1997), perhaps in the hope that it will change for the better, or that it may already be changing. Gordon feared that by asking the women in her sample if they felt marginalised, she might be contributing to their marginalisation. While I recognise from my own work the sensitive nature of discussions on singleness, the resources that women draw on for making sense of their situation do not disappear from view just because the researcher avoids them in her questioning. There are parallels with research focusing on 'race' and ethnicity, in relation to which the inadequacy of a 'colour-blind' approach has been criticised by black campaigners and recognised in the literature on racism (Fernando, 1989; Littlewood and Lipsedge, 1989). The approach that I take in this thesis is to examine more closely the range of resources drawn on in talking about singleness, and to note the rhetorical work that is undertaken in connection with the changing and polarised meanings of singleness. The final strand of literature that I include in this general review has more focus on the political and gendered nature of singleness for women, and recognises the cultural context.

Singleness as a politics

Many authors write about singleness because of their personal investment in the subject. As noted in the Introduction, an outstanding piece of work of this nature from the 1970s is that by Margaret Adams (1976). In her book, *Single Blessedness* (now out of print), she reports on informal discussions and structured in-depth interviews with men and women over the age of 25, including the 'never married', those widowed for at least five years, those without children, and those divorced for five years or more also without children, covering the full range of social classes. Adams interviewed 27 people in depth, most of her interviews were with people from three large cities on the east coast of the USA, but several were with people in England. Adams' research methods are unexceptional but the reporting of her findings tends towards the anecdotal and does not give a clear picture of her data overall. However, the book is an important text in spite of this caveat, because of the originality of her strongly feminist argument and the pioneering nature of her work.

Adams argues for a sociological understanding of singleness to replace the 'distorting prism' of psychology which has been over used to define what is essentially a social situation (1976, p. 56). She also controversially challenges the privileging of the ability to make long-term relationships as an essential component of psychological health. She suggests a circular process whereby the psychological approach which assumes deviancy from single people often sustains and reinforces the attitudes that make single people conspicuous and likely to attract the designation of eccentricity. Because these are the only modes of expression allowed her, and under the pressure of doubt cast on her psychological health, the single woman, according to Adams, has to develop a set of traits that exploit assertiveness, independence and egocentric ruthlessness. Adams points out that these pressures work in the same way as those that drive a married woman to cultivate appropriate sex-role behaviour for her status. Adams draws on labelling theory to explain this process, and comes close to developing a theory of discourses of singleness and the ways in which they regulate the single woman's behaviour. Her work has had much influence on my own thinking. However, where Adams appears to be arguing that

stigma and oppression affect the inner psychology of single women, forcing them to develop anti-social traits, I am more interested in how the cultural resources available place limits on the ways women can present themselves. In other words, if single women appear assertive, independent or ruthless, it is that appearance that interests me, and how it is conveyed through talk, rather than any presumed underlying reality that might be called a trait.

Another work which explores the connections between marriage and other statuses also notes the privileging of coupledness over singleness, pointing to advantages for the married in welfare policy, and the policing (as well as occasional compensating) of the non-married in policy terms (Chandler, 1991). Joan Chandler aims to demonstrate how marriage touches all adults, but is most keenly felt by women, arguing that discrimination against women in the public domain is often rationalised by their close connection with marriage and domesticity (Chandler, 1991). Chandler suggests that all women are in the shadow of marriage, and that there are degrees of marriage, since many women who are outside conventional marriage still have some domestic connection with men. There are links, she argues, between being a wife and femininity, and between marriage and women's residual role as economically dependent:

For all women marriage casts a long shadow, part of the way in which they are defined and categorised by their relationship to men. Wifehood is keyed into womanhood to socially stigmatise those who are unmarried. In this way the structure and ideology of marriage are central to the gendering of women.

(Chandler, 1991, p. 2)

Chandler brings together a review of a range of empirical work, including her own, referring to women in different situations such as widows, divorced, separated, those living in consensual unions and women in husband-absent marriages. Surprisingly, in the light of her analysis, she does not include those who are neither married nor living with a partner, though many of her arguments apply here too.

The other work to introduce here as offering an explicitly feminist and political viewpoint on singleness is by Becky Rosa (1994) in a chapter which looks at monogamy as an issue

for lesbians. Rosa argues that while feminists (for example Rich, 1980) have explored the pressures that push women into sexual relationships with men, they have given less attention to challenging the stigma that attaches to the single woman, being more concerned with women's rights to be lesbians. She views the individual needs that people meet in monogamous relationships as *real* needs, whether or not also socially constructed. However, Rosa argues that the monogamous couple relationship has come to be seen as the only 'natural' way of structuring society (Rosa, 1994, p. 117). This leaves single heterosexual women, like lesbians, to dispel the myth that women should be dependent on a man. Rosa comments that single women are penalised as a result. She contends that heterosexual women lack the emotional support structures built by lesbians with other women to provide a real alternative to heterosexual monogamy. This appears somewhat patronising to heterosexual women, seeming to typify them as less capable than lesbians of finding support in female friendship. However, the important issue here may centre on what 'real alternative' is taken to mean. My own data suggests that the discursive resources available for talking about singleness contain limited possibilities for consistently drawing on positive representations of the state.

This more political strand of literature brings me back to my theme of the changing meanings of singleness. The authors I have referred to as politicised in their approach respectively focus on marriage, coupledness or monogamy as responsible for a problem-oriented approach to singleness. Feminists such as Greer targeted marriage as the problem for women: 'If independence is a necessary concomitant of freedom, women must not marry' (Greer, 1971, p. 320). Nevertheless, Greer focused on marriage as the site of struggle, rather than developing an analysis of singleness. Her vision, which now seems utopian, was that women would be more free if they entered partnerships without the shackles of marriage. Feminists of her period were critical of the power relations within marriage, and some who chose not to marry may also have sought to undermine the social distinction between married and single, heterosexual and lesbian. The attack on marriage appears (from the statistics quoted in the Introduction) to have been successful. However,

as the changing analyses discussed above demonstrate, categorisation practices have proved remarkably flexible in carrying forward cultural divisions which produce similar contrasts by moving between married/single, heterosexual couple/single and monogamous couple/single. As what it means to be married or monogamous changes its meaning, one aspect for what it means to be single has continuity – it is defined by what it is not.

In the next sections I want to pull out from these diverse literatures some key themes which are particularly relevant to my project. In turn I discuss surplus women, caring responsibilities, sexuality and intimacy, autonomy and choice, and consider the ways in which the meanings of these aspects have changed or shown continuity in their application to singleness.

Surplus women

A historically important and powerful representation of singleness is the notion that a demographic imbalance between the sexes presents a problem. However, the reasons why this is seen as problematic have changed. At different times the ‘problem’ of too many women has been seen in turn as an economic issue because of the need for financial support implied, as a threat to men’s jobs when women start to enter the labour force, as an inconvenience in social events because of a disruption to the more usual pattern of couples meeting together, and as a threat to professional women who risk failure in the competition to acquire a life-long partner.

Writing of spinsters in Britain between the years of 1880 and the First World War, Sheila Jeffreys argues that significant numbers made a positive choice not to marry (Jeffreys, 1985, p. 88). However, she identifies different camps in the women’s movement of this time: one advocating for sexual intercourse within or outside marriage, the other seeing large differences of interest between men and women over issues of sexuality and advocating non co-operation with the sexual desires of men. The impetus for the debate was the concern expressed in the press over ‘excess’ or ‘surplus’ women. The 1851 census

revealed 405,000 more women than men in the population. Feminists, according to Jeffreys, wanted to deal with the problem of 'surplus' women (largely seen as a problem of the middle classes) in ways that served women's interests. For instance they campaigned for women's employment and education so that middle-class spinsters would be less dependent.

Katherine Holden (1996), in her unpublished PhD thesis, comments that while 'old maid' was a derogatory term in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the term 'spinster' was originally used for occupational status and did not begin to suggest that a woman was unmarriageable until the early nineteenth century (p. 30). Holden builds on Chandler's (1991) argument, contending that the apparent strength of marriage in the first part of the 20th century was at least partially maintained by a group of women whom it excluded. She did 30 interviews with single women and two with single men who had never married, all born in Britain before 1912. Holden (1996, 2004) also notes the continuing substantial surplus of women throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and the unprecedented rise in the surplus following the First World War (revealed in the 1921 census as 1,096 females per thousand males). Holden remarks that the existence of this 'decimated cohort' of men affected the ways in which gender roles were understood in far reaching ways. She argues that the discourse of a 'problem' of surplus women was chiefly a result of concerns that middle class women were taking men's jobs. Encouragement for women to emigrate to the colonies in search of husbands was proposed in a leading article in *The Times* in 1921 as a solution to the crisis in the labour market (*The Times*, August 25th 1921, p. 9d, cited in Holden, 1996, p. 90).

The implication contained in notions of 'surplus' is that marriage and motherhood are the only viable future for women. Several women correspondents responded to *The Times* article, pointing out the value of work done by those who were not mothers. Eleanor Rathbone questioned the need for more mothers, pointing out that 'if half the surplus women were transformed into men, married off to the other half and endowed with three children each, the net result would be a million less producers of goods and services and

four million more consumers' (The Times September 5th, 1921, p. 4c, cited in Holden, 1996, p. 91).

Although there have been repeated attempts to turn on its head the notion that there is a *problem* in having 'surplus' women, this assumption has continued to be embedded in the analysis even of those who have advocated singleness as a way of life. Hillis, in her advice book of 1936, recommends facing facts: 'The first one is that – to put it baldly – an extra woman is a problem. ... Extra women mean extra expense, extra dinner-parties, extra bridge opponents, and, all too often, extra sympathy' (p. 19). Her solution is that women need to do something about this themselves.

A different take on 'surplus' women emerged in 1986, when a *Newsweek* article called 'Too late for Prince Charming?' suggested that college-educated and professional women had missed their chances of marriage (Reilly, 1996, p. 8). The journalist quipped (inaccurately!) that a forty-year old never-married woman had more chance of being hit by a terrorist than being married. The article was based on a poorly designed study that made marriage seem a near impossibility for college women born before 1950, and its findings were quickly refuted and the authors of the original report removed the faulty statistics when they eventually published (Faludi, 1992). Nevertheless, the study's claims and the media exposure it attracted had far-reaching consequences, still being quoted on the sitcom *Frasier* ten years later, as well as referred to in the film *Sleepless in Seattle*.

Discussions about the surplus in earlier times appear to have centred upon ways of reducing it, such as the encouragement to emigrate, or that women should marry earlier, or in some other way be expected to compensate for creating inconvenience. Although Rathbone was challenging the economic validity of concerns over surplus women, her analysis points to the nature of such concerns as socially constructed, and this kind of analysis continues to be relevant. The media frenzy in the 1980s over the inaccurate predictions of the marriage chances of older women was hard to quell. Even after detailed exposure of the inaccuracy of the original research, 'conventional press wisdom held that

single women of the 1980s were desperate for marriage – a desperation that mounted with every passing unwed year’ (Faludi, 1992, p. 33). This continued in spite of the lack of evidence of such desperation from contemporary surveys (cited by Faludi) which showed in contrast that marriage was no longer the centrepiece of women’s lives. Surplusness seems to be an age-related category in relation to women, however. The greater number of women in older age groups due to differences in male/female mortality rates is rarely referred to as a ‘surplus’, or indeed as a problem of women.

Thus the ‘problem’ of surplus women has been inflected differently according to the historical and social context. There is none the less continuity in the attribution of responsibility to women themselves to deal with the consequences of their own alleged redundancy. Another enduring aspect is society’s low valuation of women except as wives or mothers. In this thesis my focus is not on whether being a woman alone really is problematic, but on the use that participants in my research made in their own accounts of supposed imbalances in the ratio of men to women, and notions such as a woman alone needing a partner or being desperate for marriage.

Caring responsibilities

A number of studies draw attention to single women as carers, but the focus in more recent representations has changed from women’s responsibilities for parents and the extended family to care for their own children (see for instance, Allen, 1989; Anderson and Stewart, 1994; Gordon, 1994). According to Vicinus, the only way that single women in the middle of the nineteenth century could achieve some independence outside the home was to carry the domestic world into the public (Vicinus, 1985). Supported by arguments from English feminists for the women’s unique contribution to the public world, the single woman was given a means of entering into new work in spheres such as the hospital, workhouse, school or other public institution (Vicinus, 1985, p. 15). This move into the world of work seems to have built on the fulfilment of responsibilities for family care by single women.

A strong vein in work that describes the lives of older people is of the single woman's role as a carer for members of the immediate or extended family. In work referring to women who are young or middle aged at the time of interviews, the caring role described is more likely to refer to the participant's own children. Holden (1996, Davidoff *et al.*, 1999) points to the ways in which the notion of 'family' is drawn on by her sample, all born in Britain before 1912, to give their lives meaning. The majority of Allen's (1989) never-married interviewees (all born in 1910) took care of their parents in their own adulthood, and most of them lived with one or both parents all their lives. Nearly all of them described close relationships with children (usually of relatives) throughout life.

Research on singleness that has included women with children has tended to devote space to the meaning of motherhood for single women, and the rewards that this offers (see for instance, Anderson and Stewart, 1994; Gordon, 1994). Gordon (1994) suggests that caring for children is a two-way process that provides women with an important source of support. She comments: 'generally, *the children filled the lives of the single mothers*' (p. 152, italics in the original). Gordon remarks that women with children were less likely than the childless to be lonely and that they did not make references to 'existential angst' (the process that Gordon found many of her interviewees went through in finding or constructing some sense of purpose in their lives). Although bringing up children alone was hard work, Gordon's participants were reluctant to dwell on the difficulties. This is an interesting depiction of motherhood as offering something special that combats many problems experienced by childless single women. Gordon is reporting on what her interviewees said about themselves, and recognises a wider context of 'familism': the ideology of the family as a basic unit of society (Barrett and McIntosh, 1982). Yet her analysis does not explore the workings of these cultural resources of positive constructions of motherhood. On the other hand, her phrase that 'children filled the lives' does more than simply report the views of single mothers. It constructs the lives of childless single women as empty, and the lives of the mothers as needing to be filled.

Although she gives no data on caring responsibilities, Adams (1976) suggests that the very

qualities that seem to make single people unlikely propositions for marriage can also be valuable social assets, and that they do hidden social service in taking care of family members. Reilly (1996) comments that most women in her study find roles that recognise and reward the self that they have solidified. She suggests that through 'niche marketing' the single woman can find a way to play a primary role in a range of other people's lives, and that she offers a special gift to others. Such claims, even when made in relation to the data being discussed, go beyond the evidence from the data. In suggesting that single women offer a 'special gift' to others, Reilly is also holding up a model of how singleness should be practised.

What is interesting in all these studies is the way in which they work up a representation of single women as part of family life, whether as carers of adults or of children. They act as testimony to the normality and completeness of single women. While many single women no doubt did, and still do, have caring responsibilities, the function that such representations of single women as carers fulfils is to demonstrate that they also have an emotional life, and are capable of giving and receiving affection. This is an important depiction that can counter representations of single women as incapable of forming lasting attachments. Caring relationships are also a resource that single women may draw on in their representation of themselves. To talk of close family and friendship relationships can demonstrate value in a life, and help women to resist an image of singleness as meaning isolation and bitterness.

Sexuality and intimacy

As Giddens (1992) and others have noted, the meaning of sexuality has changed over the course of the twentieth century. However, ideas of uni-directional changes from notions of singleness as spinsterhood and celibacy towards a notion of singleness allowing greater scope for sexual autonomy are not uncontested. What changes there have been take place in the context of some contradictory trends in the sexual power relations of gender.

Jamieson (1998, 1999) argues that Giddens' suggestion, that a transformation of intimacy

could undermine the ways in which gender and power are produced in the wider social context, plays down the widespread roots of inequality. While in recent years there is increasing diversity in actual sexual practices and large numbers of women live outside the institution of marriage, women as autonomous sexual beings can still be considered as threatening to men (Gordon, 1994).

Jeffreys (1985) refers to debates on sexual freedom carried out in 1911 and 1912 in the *Freewoman*, a feminist journal whose founder considered the Pankhursts too autocratic. Jeffreys describes a campaign which she argues had two aims. One was to discredit spinsters and their work in the women's movement by declaring, against all evidence to the contrary, that they suffered from thwarted desire that made them vicious and destructive. The other was to promote sexual freedom: the argument ran that sexual intercourse with men was vital, and since marriage was not the answer as there was a surplus of women, sexual freedom provided another way to satisfaction. According to Jeffreys, feminists who opposed the move to sexual freedom saw that men would benefit more than women from a 'new morality'. Jeffrey's claim that the attack on the spinster was integral to the attack on the lesbian is controversial. However, the passages she quotes can be seen less contentiously as establishing that there is a history of single women who recognised that sexual freedom did not take place in a context of sexual equality between men and women.

Contradictory attitudes to the sexuality of unmarried women have surfaced at different historical periods. Hillis writing in 1936 is pragmatic but reticent on the subject of whether it is acceptable for unattached women to have affairs, capturing the double-bind of the period:

Whether or not a woman has had her Moments, if she has a grain of common sense she keeps it to herself, since, if she has, most people would be shocked, and, if she hasn't, the rest would be superior'.

(Hillis, 1936, p. 94)

There are continuities in this advice with Gordon's comment more than half a century later:

Although women who are sexually active outside a romantic relationship are generally considered 'bad', women who do not engage in sex are considered 'odd'. Pressures on women are thus contradictory: to engage in sex and not to engage in sex.

(Gordon, 1994, p. 122)

Hillis remarks that writing on the sex life of the unmarried woman over the preceding twenty years moved from an acceptance that 'a little sex life wasn't a bad idea' to a recognition that 'the Woman Pays ... in a thousand little shabbinesses and humiliations, in the almost inevitable bitter ending, and in nervous wear and tear' (Hillis, 1936, p. 95).

Hillis may have recognised a trend in views on single women and sexuality, but the area has also continued to be a contested one. A book written 15 years later, in 1951, explored the 'problems of singleness' and assumed that singleness meant the absence of both sexual relationships and childbearing. It found the single woman isolated and frustrated and therefore incomplete:

[This book] cannot give any adequate answers to the single woman's outstanding questions – 'Why am I to be husbandless and childless? How can I lead this unnatural life with some measure of fulfilment?' It cannot offer to banish any of the frustrations, depressions, restlessness, which come from such a disastrous denial of a woman's natural rights to biological and psychological completion.

(Smith, 1952 p. vii)

Nancy Peterson (1981), in her sociological study found that a fair number of the older women in her sample (born between the early 1900s and 1920) had never had a sexual relationship with a man, and were technically virgins. She did autobiographical interviews with 80 never-married women, which she reproduces as edited extracts. Peterson describes as 'quite limited' the relationships with men of this sexually inexperienced group. A few professed never to have had the slightest interest in them, had never dated or had what could be called purely social relationships with a man, nor any homosexual experience or interest in homosexuality (p. 247). In contrast, she comments on the diversity and variety of women's relationships with men described by her sample as a whole, and the difficulty of finding any common thread in how relationships are depicted. The notion of men as friends and companions, rather than a focus on sexuality, is one that emerges in different periods of literature on singleness. Roulston (the name under which Hillis later wrote as a widow) highlights the work that women re-entering social life have

to do to gain some close male company. She argues for the importance of platonic friendships: 'The women who have enough warmth and understanding to make men confide in them are the happiest women in the world, next to the happily married ones, and the confidences poured out make them still warmer and more sympathetic' (Roulston, 1951 p. 64). Roulston advises the woman who wants to develop her friendship with a man that she should: 'Learn to like what he suggests doing, even if you have always thought it a bore' (p. 65).

Roulston has further counsel warning of the man who has never divorced the wife married in his dim, dead past, and the man who has no intention of marrying anybody:

There are a good many of both in the over-fifty bracket and they are delighted to find an attractive woman who will let herself drift into becoming what is commonly (in more senses than one) called a steady lady friend, tying up her evenings to meet his convenience. It is possible that this plan will suit you too, we can't think why, but it's a good idea to be very sure that you won't get hurt and that you can avoid being talked about, or don't mind it.

(1951, p. 112).

This pragmatic and common-sense advice contrasts strongly with more recent reporting of some value to women in relationships that have restrictions. Anderson and colleagues (1994) note that it can suit some single women well to have a close relationship with a man that has boundaries to it. They suggest that boundaries of time and space in relationships provide ways that women can protect themselves against losing their sense of self (Anderson *et al.*, 1994, p. 211). The study describes couples who choose to have a 'weekends only' relationship, or who, for reason of living at a distance are limited to getting together only periodically. There are stories, too, of relationships with 'confirmed bachelors' with whom women have maintained successful long-term relationships. Anderson *et al.* (1994) also refer to single women's relationships with married men, stressing that they wish neither to condemn or condone this practice but recognise that it has always been part of the social fabric. They comment that women were often reluctant to talk of their affairs with married men, but when they did, their stories were more positive than might be anticipated:

Far from being tales of lonely women getting only table scraps at the feast of life, cheated by all the weekends and holidays they must spend alone, many women experienced these relationships as providing the joys of romance and sex while not demanding more from them than they wanted to give.

(Anderson *et al.*, 1994 p. 212)

Richardson, in her study of 65 single women involved with married men, found that they often idealised their lover and the relationship in the earlier stages of their relationship (Richardson, 1988). She argues that the secrecy of such relationships often means that the woman withdraws from her usual social network and that she lacks public validation if the relationship comes to an end. The secrecy of the relationship, contends Richardson, protects the interests of those with the greater status and power, the married man rather than the single woman. My own interest is in how women talk about such relationships, and how stories of unavailable men work to provide women with different subject positions in talking about their relationships.

A number of writers contrast the need for sexual relations with the need for intimacy.

Gordon argues that the family has monopolised caring, security, sharing, trust and intimacy, so that these elements are often lacking in human relationships outside the context of the family, with consequences for single women (Gordon, 1994, pp. 106–7).

Gordon found that women in her study often expressed the need to ‘work at’ obtaining intimacy, and spoke of having to learn to give and receive intimacy. They might find intimacy through friends or relatives. Gordon suggests that being outside the prevalent pattern of marriage meant that her participants had to put more energy into constructing their own ease and comfort with their status and making decisions on how they organised their lives (p. 108).

As I discussed in the first section of this chapter, Becky Rosa (1994) looks at the issues for lesbians in *monogamy*, which she links to a package which all women are expected to buy into, and which goes far beyond being involved in sexual relations with men. She points to a socially constructed expectation of love for a partner – in fact many people do not love or even like their partner. The love that people feel for their same sex friends is minimised, and romantic love privileged above all other sorts of relationship. For monogamy to exist,

she argues, there needs to be a division between sexual or romantic love and nonsexual love. Rosa considers that since lesbians have to invent their own relationships there are opportunities for them to challenge monogamy.

A nonmonogamous society would not presume that because a woman felt closer to someone one day she would necessarily feel closest to them the next day, week, month or year, and it would not assume to know how that relationship was constructed nor would it elevate that relationship over all others.

(Rosa, 1994, p. 118).

Rosa raises (and exaggerates) an interesting point here. While it may be hard for most people to imagine a society where loving relationships were not assumed to have continuity, the taken-for-granted position of love at the top of a hierarchy of relationships contributes to the common view that other kinds of intimate relationship do not really count. In her work on women's talk, Jennifer Coates notes that while women's female friendships are often as fulfilling, sometimes more so, as their relationships with men, they tend to put a sexual relationship with a man at the centre of their lives (Coates, 1996). Lynn Jamieson explores a shift in discourse from intimacy as only to be found in an idealised version of family life, towards intimacy as an idealised version of personal life (Jamieson, 1998). However, she warns that the nature and significance of this change is highly contested (Jamieson, 1998; 1999).

In this thesis I argue that women who are not currently in a loving relationship may measure their 'relationship history' against what they assume to be a normal trajectory of one long-term or permanent partnership. Arguments for a wider definition of what counts as intimacy give single women another set of resources to draw on and work with.

Autonomy

'Autonomy' is not a term that is naturally applied to women. Where it is used it has a special meaning to denote something out of the ordinary. It appears to be more readily applied to those who are single, rather than to women in a couple relationship. However, this application has changed from one of self-realisation through education and professional advancement, to a depiction of autonomy as a personal process that requires

constant work and attention to those forces that may undermine the independent woman.

A discourse that has emerged in the later part of the twentieth century is that it is difficult for a woman to realise her own creativity at the same time as involving herself with a man (Adams, 1976). It is argued that women try to accommodate too much in their relationships, automatically deferring to their partners' needs and opinions, and sacrificing their independent identities as women (Adams, 1976; Anderson *et al.*, 1994).

Reilly (1996) contends that this involves presenting a 'false self' and that the married woman can become isolated from herself and her partner as she buries her 'real self'. She quotes an interviewee who depicts this struggle: 'Anyone who tries to get intimacy without having their identity first won't get it. Period.' (Reilly, 1996, p. 55).

Thinking on autonomy for women stretches some way back in time. Allen (1989) discusses women's writing in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in northeastern, white America. She refers to a cohort of women born between 1780 and 1840 who had benefited from education and employment as well as possessing literary abilities. Apparently they articulated 'single blessedness' by cultivating the female self and striving for personal autonomy. This became more widespread in the American south, too, after the civil war, and there were more opportunities for women to remain unwed due to the availability of cheap or free land.

However, the literature on single women for most of the twentieth century shows autonomy as a potential benefit and goal rather than something available for all to possess. Autonomy has to be worked at. Accommodation (with a partner) and autonomy (on your own) tend to be presented as mutually exclusive in this literature, which does not explore the possibilities for women to be independent and autonomous while living with their partners. Hillis (1936) gives guarded approval to the benefits of life alone and suggests there is a technique to doing this successfully. She suggests planning to make the best of it and arranging 'your life so that you really do like it' (Hillis, 1936, p. 18). This is damning with faint praise: the benefits are not goals in themselves but side effects of

failure at relationships.

More than half a century later, Anderson *et al.* (1994) also have somewhat equivocal observations, writing of giving up 'the dream of happy ever after', (p. 84). They argue that the crucial step for the never-married women in their study was to recognise that they had made choices all along that contributed to their remaining single. Even after an unwanted divorce, according to Anderson *et al.* (1994), women often found that, instead of feeling devastated forever, in time they felt 'downright good'. Their commentary is stern: 'As they exited the fog, they encountered a choice point: They could focus on feeling deprived of their marital status and all that it implied, or they could build on the autonomy that was now part of their lives'.

Reilly (1996) too, finds that choice is the key to feeling good, and that those who feel they have no control are the unhappiest. She characterises as 'singular' the women in her study who have made a successful journey from girlhood, and found an identity that can sustain partnership or do without it. 'The singular woman likes herself, she values her place in the world, and she makes her way through the world without apology' (Reilly, 1996, p. 7).

What all these discussions point to is the way in which images of women who succeed in living alone happily are *marked* by their gender. When a category is marked, it stands out as unusual. The gender that is unmarked (in this case male) is assumed to be doing what is normal (Tannen, 1995). The very notion of autonomy is associated with maleness, while dependence is associated with femaleness. There is therefore an implicit assumption that to be single, whether by staying in this state or as a result of relationship breakdown, is difficult, undesirable, and requires adjustment. Women who have managed to adapt well to the conditions of singleness and turn their situation to their advantage are not what might be ordinarily expected, instead they are *singular*.

In this thesis I shall note the ways in which women make use of the humanistic discourse that involves recognising – often in retrospect – their decisions; and seeing integration and satisfaction in independence and autonomy. Stories of self-fulfilment and progress are

a resource that can help women to view their lives positively. They can also bring problems in the form of an idealised version of what singleness means, which can make it more difficult to acknowledge tensions and disappointments.

Choice

As my discussion of autonomy has highlighted, 'choice' is an important theme in literature on singleness. Although lifelong singleness has been a significant alternative to marriage throughout history (Allen, 1989), a focus on representations of women as actively choosing singleness, and enquiry into whether or not singleness has been chosen is relatively contemporary. Stein thought it possible to identify the degree of choice people had exercised over their single status and created a typology of 'singlehood' that consisted of 'voluntary temporary singles', 'voluntary stable singles', 'involuntary temporary singles' and 'involuntary stable singles' (Stein, 1981). This typology may never have been a satisfactory way of understanding the part played by choice, and later work that has attempted to explore the question of choice has drawn attention to a distinction between 'voluntariness' and 'choice' (Gordon, 1994).

Adams (1976) questions the assumption, which she suggests is prevalent, that those who do not marry demonstrate personal inadequacy or maladjustment. Instead she points to the lack of institutional definition or support for single people. Adams comments on two major issues for women in making a choice about whether or not to marry. The first is the conflict that women have about which role and lifestyle they want – marriage, exclusive commitment and dependency with the risk of domestic incarceration, or freedom, psychological autonomy and the potential loneliness of non-attachment – a choice that Adams says men do not have to make. The second is that women still retain the residual conviction that they are doomed to be passively manipulated rather than arbiters of their own destiny (Adams, 1976, pp. 164–165).

Peterson (1981) reviews the reasons her participants gave for never marrying – never meeting anyone they wanted to marry, loving and being loved never coinciding, death of a

suitors, parental disapproval, assumption of family responsibilities on death of a parent, unhappy parental marriages, feelings of unattractiveness, lack of interest in men, distaste for marriage, career aspirations – and decides that there must be deeper reasons. Most had received proposals of marriage, so Peterson argues that they showed some choice in remaining single. Her sample's need for autonomy and space in contrast to the restrictions of conventional marriage offers Peterson one common theme. She looks to the 'deep, hidden recesses of our psyche' for deeper reasons still. However, like Adams, she also turns to questions of social expectations for another perspective, and points out that it is deeply embedded in western culture that women *must* marry, so that those who refuse to do so are flying in the face of convention.

It is a circuitous route that Peterson takes to read choice into her sample's decisions *not* to accept their offers of marriage. It is premised on the widely shared understanding that women have to wait to be asked to marry. Their choice, in this light, is always a restricted one. It is not an unfettered choosing of the person they wish to marry (or decision not to do so). They can only choose to marry, or not, those who have presented themselves as available and willing.

Allen (1989) argues, in relation to her cohort of widowed and never-married women born in 1910, that the 'road to permanent singlehood' was a hidden event in the female life course. She describes this as a process, which consisted of a series of events and transitions during childhood and young adulthood that cut across several life course careers. Some combination of events linked to friends, family, education, work, residence and health interacted to limit the opportunity or desire to marry. The four main patterns for a smaller sample of 15 never-married women interviewed in depth were: that they were needed by their mothers to help with the family; financial need and lack of family support meant they had to fend for themselves; 'broken hearts' from fiancés who were killed or who found someone else; and more career oriented women who had something they wanted to accomplish.

Allen's approach provides an interesting combination of inevitability and happenstance. On one hand there is a defined route to lifelong singleness, which gives an impression of purposefulness and inevitability. On the other hand, the route is hidden, and can only be discerned as such with hindsight, its markers consisting of circumstances and events. Allen does not highlight choice and agency in her sample's life course.

Gordon (1994) in discussing whether the women in her sample were single by choice differentiates between choosing not to develop particular relationships and deciding to be single. There may not have been an overall choice to be single, but many small decisions led in that direction. Gordon argues that ambivalence is an important element in relation to choice, and that while over half of her sample expected to get married when they were young, the majority were single voluntarily. Anderson *et al.* (1994) point out that choosing a relationship means giving up other aspects of life, and that this choice may prove not worthwhile. They give examples of women who consciously chose to remain single, having recognised the restrictions that a relationship was placing on them.

Faced with the cultural isolation that singleness can involve, it can be hard for women to think of themselves as having chosen to be single. Most of the literature of the late twentieth century comments on some ambivalence among women on this question (Gordon, 1994; Reilly, 1996; Lewis and Moon, 1997; Clements, 1998). What I shall be looking at in this thesis is the ways in which some awareness of the advantages of singleness as well as its drawbacks can be used by women as a positive resource in their identity work. While women may indeed have some contradictory feelings about being single, in expressing these they are also reflecting ambivalence in their wider cultural context (Reynolds, 2002).

Conclusion

In this chapter I have reviewed literature on singleness, placed it in context, done a partial social history of changing meanings of singleness, and picked out some main themes and taken a discursive or representational perspective on these themes. The changing

meanings of the regularly discussed themes in relation to singleness are likely to be crucial constituent resources for women's narrative and identity work. They also contribute to the broader ideological context.

There is widespread agreement that single women are stigmatised, but there has been little investigation of the ways in which women defined as single respond to and work with the typical constructions of their identity available in the public arena. In this study, as I have indicated, I argue that singleness is best viewed as a discursively constructed social category. The discursive field organising 'singleness' marks the identity of single women through the subject positions (Davies and Harré, 1990) and interpretative repertoires (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) it offers for making sense of life patterns. In the next chapter I discuss different models for theorising the single identity which are implicit in literature on singleness and explain more of my own approach to a single identity as discursively constructed.

CHAPTER 2

The construction of a single identity

Gone now the years of my halcyon twenties
 And thirties are looming alarming ahead
 And family members have started their sighing
 Indulgently at me and shaking their heads
 'Cause here I am, the family maiden aunt
 Oh isn't-it-sad, marriage-hopes-are-fading aunt
 The lonely-future-expectation-laden aunt
 I wonder what on earth's to become of me now?

(Small, 1982)

Introduction

In this chapter I turn to issues of the subjectivity of the single woman, and trace how the 'single identity' has been theorised in the empirical social science literature. The empirical work on singleness has drawn extensively on psychological and sociological frameworks developed for broader purposes of examining human experience. A variety of different models of identity has been employed, although at times the theoretical stance has been more implicit than explicit. I identify the distinctive approaches used by different authors, referring to the work of some already introduced in Chapter 1 as well as some additions. I also draw on a wider range of psychological and sociological literature that underpins theoretically the different models of identity introduced here. In turn, I discuss and critique *life cycle*, *psychodynamic*, and *experiential* models of identity as applied to single women. Although I am critical of all of these models, finding them rigid and prescriptive in their approach to identity, I am interested in the multiple possibilities for subjectivity that they offer to single women as resources for thinking and talking about themselves. I outline the approach to theorising a single identity that I wish to develop in this thesis.

In brief, my approach understands identity as made up through social practices, and aims to view single women more as social selves rather than self-contained individuals (Burkitt, 1991). I regard identity as a negotiated performance that may be performed differently for different sets of circumstances. Rather than something that is fixed and unchanging, I expect identity to be shaped by the wider cultural resources available to the individual, his or her own personal history and the conversational turns suggested by the immediate

situation. The use that I shall be making in this study of the different theoretical models of identity that emerge from the empirical literature is to examine and explore how women alone draw on these models in their talk and in their sense-making of their experience of living alone.

There are not precise equivalents in the purpose and usage of different models of identity. Life cycle and psychodynamic models tend to be used by authors writing of their clinical practice with single women in therapeutic settings, although some authors (for instance Allen, 1989) are more interested in developing theoretical tools for their empirical study. In contrast, experiential models are more often used by authors writing of their qualitative research or enquiry. It is rare, in this area, for one model to be used to the exclusion of all others. As the previous chapter suggests, there are many common themes in the literature on singleness. Most writers acknowledge the force of social and cultural expectations, and the effects of cultural representations on women's self image. For instance, while many writers draw on psychodynamic thinking, none of these seek to suggest that all difficulties encountered by single women stem from early unconscious influences.

As I have indicated in the previous chapter, there are useful insights and approaches to singleness in the literature. My purpose here is to set up a range of 'ideal types' for the explanations given in relation to identity and singleness. What do different models imply when pursued in a rigorous fashion? What does the 'single identity' mean according to different models? What different ways do they offer a woman on her own of understanding her life and her current situation?

Life cycle model

Several writers on singleness have attempted to make sense of single women's lives through the adaptation of family life cycle models, often developing this as a 'life course' model (Allen, 1989; Lewis and Moon, 1997; Schwartzberg *et al.*, 1995). Since the term 'family life cycle' does not seem necessarily appropriate to a trajectory for single people, and even those proposing a 'life course' approach still maintain strong links with family

life cycle antecedents, I have grouped different models here under the umbrella term of 'life cycle'.

Basic assumptions of life cycle models

Life cycle models stem from literature on family therapy (see for instance, Carter and McGoldrick, 1980), and thus, in the main, their purpose is therapeutic. Such approaches generally draw on the notion of development as a biological phenomenon, and the sets of beliefs and cultural expectations that people have about change and development.

Cultures will vary in how different transitions are conceptualised – the age at which children are expected to leave the parental home, for instance, or the impact on a family of childbirth. However these approaches assume that there are some universal aspects of development that present the need to adapt and change at key transitional points, such as courtship, marriage, birth of children, children leaving home and retirement.

Identity in this model is something that changes, adapts and develops appropriately according to the life circumstances. It is a social model of identity, based on cultural expectations of the individual at key life points, but with an underlying assumption that some aspects of development must be negotiated whatever the cultural context. The individual will not necessarily feel that she is acting according to social requirements, but will perceive the stages identified as having resonance in her own life. There will be a sense of comfort and fit, or lack of it, according to her ability to negotiate these stages successfully.

Literature on singleness and the life cycle model

The life cycle model is deficient in capturing the life stages of women parenting on their own, or who are childless. However, some writers have nonetheless attempted to extend the model to embrace the lives of single women. Allen (1989), in her comparison study of 30 women born in 1910, half of whom had never married or had children, and the others widows, observes that women's life course is structured around a sequence of marital and parental roles. There are socially recognised rites of passage – but these do not have salience for single women. Allen found that all her participants were connected to their

families as the focal point in their lives, but the caring work of those who had never married was invisible and devalued. Her argument is that connectedness with family is just as important for single women as for those entering a child rearing cycle, and Allen proposes a concept of life course variation to extend the family life cycle model.

Schwartzberg *et al.* (1995) writing of their clinical practice in family therapy, add their own modifications to the life cycle model, to highlight the developmental issues relevant to the single adult. They make use of the concept of differentiation of self (the process of defining one's separateness and connection to one's family) as a key to understanding the single adult's position in their nuclear family. Their aim is to expand the framework for what constitutes an authentic life and increase the options beyond the search for a relationship. Schwartzberg *et al.* argue that the emotional interconnectedness of family members' lives in the present and the past is what gives meaning to people's lives. Thus in looking at the life cycle of the single adult, they advise therapists to look at the impact of other family members' life stage issues, as well as how the family as a whole accommodates to the life choices of its members. For instance, parents who have expected to see their adult children marry and have children, may feel and express disappointment when this does not take place.

Since the organisation of rearing children is not a key focus for the single, childless adult, Schwartzberg *et al.* argue that this particular stage division is irrelevant for them. The alternative that they propose is to target other developmental drivers that push the individual and family through time, such as relationship with work, finances, peer network and family and culture. The stages themselves are structured by biology or age as key organisers of perceptions of the self and the fit with family and society.

Without the purposes of family and child-rearing processes, the stages suggested by Schwartzberg *et al.* look rather bleakly focused on ageing and health. The progression is from:

- Not yet married

- The thirties: entering the 'Twilight Zone' of singlehood
- Midlife (forties to mid-fifties)
- Later life (fifties to when physical health fails)
- Elderly (between failing health and death).

They warn that this should not be seen as a hierarchical progression, with one stage building on another. However in their schematic depiction of the model, emotional processes are linked with specific stages. For instance, the thirties involve:

1. Facing single status for the first time
2. Expanding life goals to include other possibilities in addition to marriage.

The model presented by Schwartzberg *et al.* is so firmly rooted in the stages involved in the cycle of families, that it appears that what single people are needing to negotiate is their deviation from the normal progression of family life and child-rearing. Chandler (1991) criticises life cycle and life course models for not being sufficiently rooted in the variability of the social context. She argues that they make assumptions about typical individuals and families. She finds a weakness in those models which offer a plurality of pathways and variable timing of transitions since they portray women as mistresses of their own fate, their circumstances individualised. The pathways of their lives appear idiosyncratic and the extent to which they are able to navigate their own journeys exaggerated.

Lewis and Moon (1997) refer to a model used by Lewis (1994) which describes eight non-sequential developmental tasks for adult singles. Placing the emphasis on tasks, rather than progressive age and biology related stages, removes some of the more overt depiction of the single life as deviant. However, Lewis's non-sequential tasks do become progressively more age related as we move down the list of eight (adapted from Lewis and Moon, 1997, pp. 129–130):

1. Grounding (in the home, neighbourhood, career, finances, social life)

2. Friendships (having close female friends, pruning close friendships – keeping them compatible with personal and professional growth, making new friendships)
3. Basic needs (for daily contact, security, touch, rituals, enhanced use of free time)
4. Sexual feelings (acknowledging them, numbing them, transitioning between)
5. Children and other forms of nurturing (making a decision about children, nurturing self, nurturing others, being nurtured by others)
6. Grieving (accepting the ambiguity, grieving lost dreams, separating a single woman's grief from her family's grief)
7. Making peace with the parents (teaching them to treat the single woman as an adult, resolving old issues or finding a tolerable place for them, accepting the positive traits/styles/rituals and rejecting the rest)
8. Old age (having a positive image of the single self in old age, preparing financially, maintaining friendships, considering living options, preparing for death, eg will, burial arrangements).

The Lewis tasks are proposed as relevant for adult single people and it is not made clear by the authors whether they are also adaptable for adults who marry – they appear fairly universal tasks in the summary given. It might seem that the Lewis model is potentially more inclusive, and therefore less stigmatising than that from Schwartzberg *et al.* But the model is predicated on a notion of acceptance and adjustment to the changes that come with ageing and continued singleness. Such notions of age-appropriate attitudes and behaviour have been criticised for their oppressive and ageist nature, for instance in *Growing Old Disgracefully*, (The Hen Co-op, 1993). There are assumptions in this model of identity that there are particular sorts of feelings that a single person can expect to have, and by implication, a 'right' way to have these feelings (grief and its resolution, acknowledgement of sexual feelings, which can then be placed in abeyance).

This variation of the life cycle model has a prescriptive feel to it. Once she has succeeded at the developmental tasks a woman will be living her life in a number of life-enhancing

ways. There are cultural assumptions built into Lewis's vision of well-adjusted single life. However, because it is not obvious that they are cultural assumptions, women may define themselves as deficient if they cannot deal with the task outlined.

In summary, the problems with the application of a life cycle model to the lives of women alone are the claims that the model makes. The model purports to incorporate fundamental biological imperatives, fundamental aspects of change in roles and relationships as well as societal aspects of change and organisation of relationships (Dallos, 1996). It needs therefore to be universally applicable and recognisable to single women as well as their wider families. The family life cycle model as described by Carter and McGoldrick (1980) may have little personal relevance to women alone. However, it will have meaning for them as a dominant cultural storyline, or master narrative that shapes their lives, as it may be the course that they and others have expected their lives to take. They may indeed experience the model as a source of oppression.

What kind of identity is being proposed by variants of the life cycle model? Although the notion of a person going through stages aims to incorporate change and transition in the individual life, it actually suggests a rather fixed and static identity, where the same basic character matures and develops but does not deviate from the track. Although therapists are advised by Schwartzberg *et al.* to help the single person shift their life story from one of lack of marital status, the basic model does not incorporate an assumption that the self is fluid and makes use of shifting narratives. As with the Lewis (1994) approach, some women may experience as pressure the insistence of Schwartzberg *et al.* on the individual confronting her status and defining an authentic life for herself within the single status. A woman who is not currently involved in an intimate relationship may feel that she has to define herself as single and plan her life accordingly. While this may suit some, others may hope that by keeping their status undefined they can maintain a range of possible options. However, to the extent that ideas about a life cycle are embedded in the cultural context, they cannot be discarded as intellectual tools, and may be useful resources for some

women. My own data shows, in Chapter 5, that the cultural storyline of the family life cycle is also one which women may use to position themselves against, in explaining why they made the choices they did.

Psychodynamic models

As with the other models discussed, a psychodynamic model is rarely used explicitly or exclusively to explain and work with issues for single women.

Basic assumptions of psychodynamic models

The term 'psychodynamic' stems from the tradition developed by Freud and extended by other psychoanalysts, and goes beyond this to encompass a wide range of changing ideas about what drives social life (Thomas, 1996, p. 283). The perspective aims to find generalisations about psychological processes, but the data come from the clinical work of psychoanalysts. Psychoanalysts prioritise the subjectivity of the person they are studying (Frosh, 1989). The aim is to make the actions and emotions of the subject intelligible through causal explanations at the level of the subject's desires. However, the individual subjects are themselves often unaware of their own purposes and meanings.

The idea of psychological defences is central: according to psychodynamic thinking, we structure our lives defensively in order to avoid anxiety. The internal versions of the world are formed very early in life, and are emotionally charged constructions (Thomas, 1996). Experiences in childhood are thus very important in psychoanalytic theory, although there is a good deal of disagreement among psychoanalysts about the nature of the child's subjective world.

One criticism of psychoanalysis is its preoccupation with an individual level of explanation. The explanatory notions of psychoanalysis are always complex, but rarely enough so to incorporate the power of social forces into its frame of reference (Frosh, 1989). Chodorow also critiques the tendency in clinical practice to focus on the sense of self and relationship that comes from the individual family (1995). She argues that it is important to look at cultural practices as well:

How people conceptualise themselves as gendered varies by a number of factors, including culture, history and early family development – the *specifics* of the family and its meanings ... What becomes important are not just anyone's femaleness or maleness, but the psychologically and culturally *specific* meanings that gender holds *for them*.

(Chodorow, 1995, p.100).

Feminist therapists have tried to transform the therapeutic relationship through feminist understanding that women's psychology is formed within a particular social context (Eichenbaum and Orbach, 1987, p. 51). Eichenbaum and Orbach draw on sex-role theory within their psychodynamic model. They suggest that a woman's psychology is defined to a large extent by her designated social role as a mother. She will have been brought up to take on the social role of caregiver and nurturer. A further defining feature for Eichenbaum and Orbach is the idea that a woman has only reached adulthood when she has connected herself with a man. In order to find a man, she must make herself into someone that others will find appealing.

Eichenbaum and Orbach (1987) suggest that many women have difficulty in experiencing their own identity as a separate free-standing person who relates with other separate people. They seek self-definition through relating to others. They may stay in unsatisfactory relationships for fear of a loss of self if they were to withdraw from the relationship. They seek new relationships driven not just by need for connection, but for identity.

Literature on singleness and psychodynamic models

We might expect an 'ideal type' psychodynamic approach to understanding women alone to emphasise:

1. Early experiences which influence the potential for intimacy and closeness.
2. The difficulty women have experienced in separating themselves from their mothers and their subsequent need to be needed.
3. Distress attached to unsatisfactory relationships in the past.
4. The effects of previous losses on current sense of self.
5. The formation of defences to protect against such distress, which may make closeness

more difficult to achieve.

6. Hankering after a relationship driven by the need for identity.

Margaret Adams (1976) sets up a critique of what she calls psychological theorising, which can be read as a critique of psychodynamic approaches. She refers, for instance, to a persistent belief in psychological explanations for single women's failure to marry, and an assumption that the defence of *rationalisation* is used by single women. If women express their preference for being single and their belief that they have deliberately made this choice they are thought to be rationalising and 'making the best of a bad job'. According to Adams, the ultimate defence tactic levelled at women alone is *denial*. This strategy is held responsible for unresolved conflict, pent-up psychic energy, and emotional and social attrition.

Quotations in the literature on singleness from women's own accounts suggest that psychodynamic thinking is often drawn on by women to make sense of their circumstances. For instance, Siegel interviewed 51 older single women comparing their motivation towards marriage with 51 demographically matched married women. One of Siegel's respondents says:

Marriage is something that I have always wanted and never been able to put together. I go to the single-mothers groups and they say we are stronger and more independent, and that's why we don't have relationships or successful relationships with men. Then when you really get to know them, you find that most of us come from highly dysfunctional families and there are real problems there in not having successful dual relationships. I used to pick the wrong kind of guy because of unconscious factors motivating me to pick people who weren't treating me well.

(Siegel, 1995, p. 7 of 13)

'Picking the wrong kind of guy' is also a common theme in self-help books, which may explain why it has become a resource used by women to account for their own behaviour. Robin Norwood (1985) for instance, in her extremely influential *Women Who Love Too Much*, proposes a syndrome of co-dependency. According to Norwood, women who have come from severely troubled families choose men who have problems and are emotionally unavailable. By doing this they unconsciously recreate and relive significant aspects of their own childhood.

Tricia Bickerton (1983), writing of her workshops at the Women's Therapy Centre, London, for 'women alone', identifies the relationship between mother and daughter as crucial to a woman's lack of self-esteem. Daughters, she says, are taught to believe that their lives depend on another, and are therefore ill-equipped to imagine life on their own. It is hard for the adult woman to understand her own needs, or go some way toward meeting them, when her identity has been formed on the basis of serving others.

Bickerton also explores difficulties for some women in forming close, sexual relationships, and argues that individual reasons are important as well as social structural constraints. She suggests that women may have formed defences in childhood as necessary for survival, which they then continue to operate in adulthood. Memories of being touched may be painful or faint, and getting too close may feel terrifying. While a relationship may be desired, the fear of losing even an artificial independence may seem more disturbing. Resentment at not having a sexual partner may emerge as bitterness related to early relationships, which then deters anyone who comes too close. Unexpressed anger towards others can stop a woman from acting on her own behalf (Bickerton, 1983).

According to Bickerton, a woman may fear her own negative hostile emotions and imagine their devastating effect on others. There is often the fantasy that she is destructive and undeserving and must keep her distance – that being alone may be a punishment for her badness. Some women, argues Bickerton, will drive themselves towards perfection in the hope of finding lasting relationships, striving to achieve more, or become more attractive. She identifies this as a defence that may appear necessary to prevent collapse, but which serves to prevent any real contact being made.

There are some problems with the mixture in this theorising of social and cultural expectations of women, a normative line of development from little girl to adult woman, and the hypothesis of specific problems in the past re-emerging for women who are alone. The impact of social and cultural expectations may be transmitted and felt at an individual level. But there is some circularity in the identification of potential problems rooted in the

individual woman's past as a cause of her remaining single. Orbach and Eichenbaum portray women normatively as likely to feel inadequate, to suffer low self-esteem, and to be driven by social expectations that maturity involves connection to a man. According to their model, these are the results of social-role expectations, passed on through psychodynamic processes particularly involving the relationship between mother and daughter. Yet Bickerton's analysis also proposes these as *causes* for some individual women, preventing them from forming intimate heterosexual relationships. How can judgements be made as to the relative importance of cultural constraints and individual pathology? If a woman who has suffered while single, and assumes her failure to achieve intimacy is because of her own pathology, then goes on to form a satisfactory sexual relationship, how should this be understood? Has she overcome her problem, or was her earlier distress simply normal reaction to her cultural conditioning? If all women suffer low self-esteem, would all benefit from psychodynamic help? The significantly higher number of women than men seeking therapy, in many clinics comprising two-thirds of all patients (Bankoff, 1994), suggests that this is what many women have come to believe.

Concepts of loss and grief form another area on which therapists writing on singleness have focused on as integral to the single identity. Losses include the disappointment at not having children; loss of time in searching for a man; loss of assurance about the future. At no point do women know for sure that they will not marry in the future – as long as there is the hope of marriage, there is the pain of ambiguity (Lewis and Moon, 1997, p. 126).

There is also the loss of previous relationships. Bickerton (1983, p. 163) comments that the pain of ending relationships may lead to avoidance of new connections. She argues that the fear of becoming attached represents to the woman alone the risk of losing a new relationship, and also of losing oneself. While many women create interesting lives, Bickerton suggests they often feel there is something missing in not having a close sexual relationship. There is an issue of how to be close and separate, dependent and independent. For some women, to admit dependency feels like giving up a hard-won sense of themselves (Bickerton, 1983).

Of course, marriage and relationships also involve uncertainty (Duck, 1994). Although Lewis and Moon (1997) report that the women in their study spoke almost longingly of having certainty about not meeting a man, and thus being able to get on with their lives, some uncertainty would seem to be part of the human condition. Internalising and externalising the blame are both ways of dealing with uncertainty, and as long as marriage-type relationships are privileged above all others, thereby inducing a sense of failure in those not in such relationships, women will continue to move between these explanations.

There is much sensitive description of single women's concerns and fears in the literature that draws on psychodynamic traditions. It can be empowering for women to read it and identify feelings that they have also experienced. The approach also offers some solutions, which adds to its attraction as a set of explanations. However, these solutions may be turning social problems into psychological problems, and herein lies the major criticism of psychodynamic models. Lewis and Moon give a hint of this danger, as they caution that therapists should distinguish ambivalence that is *unconscious*. In contrast are women who are *aware* that they are acting positively to counter their family's pessimism about being single, or because they think it is politically correct, while still feeling lonely. However, they seem to have fallen into a trap of dividing their subjects into those who have legitimate contradictory feelings, and those whose contradictions are still hidden from them. In reality, there is little that can distinguish those who are working with 'social contradictions', and those who are working with 'unconscious contradictions', and this is a crucial problem with the psychodynamic model of identity.

Psychodynamic models are tied to finding individual solutions to what are essentially conceptualised as psychological problems. There is thus over-emphasis on treating as dysfunctional, aspects of women's development which are also presented as normative. Calls to therapists to avoid participating in a woman's self-blame are unlikely to meet with positive effect, since a psychodynamic model does not offer guidance on distinguishing what is socially constructed and what is individual pathology.

The very nature of therapy is to help its subjects change, yet the emphasis in psychodynamic approaches on early childhood experience produces quite a pre-determined model of identity. Identity appears to be formed at a very early age, and this leaves little room for later identity-forming experiences. The influence of feminist theorising has allowed for a conceptualisation of a gendered identity, predicated in the case of women on connectedness, but this still is founded on an identity that is formed from early experiences.

A fundamental difficulty with psychodynamic models is their focus on areas of personality that may remain hidden from the individual concerned. While such explanations may be compelling and convincing, they are not verifiable. The individual herself is by definition debarred from knowing whether they are correct, and others do not have access to her subjective experience. In contrast, as the quotation from Siegel's (1995) study suggests, women may come to believe in a psychodynamic explanation of their situation, and act in accordance with such beliefs. This in itself gives such explanations considerable force.

My data is not clinical case history, and because it was not collected with such a purpose in mind, it is not amenable to psychodynamic interpretation. What interests me is the use that women make of psychodynamic explanation of their situation. It may be empowering for women to draw on psychodynamic understanding and find recognition of their feelings. To what extent, however, does the use of a psychodynamic framework tend to *produce* a particular type of feeling – by giving sanction does it also give expression? In the analysis of my own data I look for ways in which my participants employ a psychodynamic way of thinking about their lives.

Experiential models

Much of the literature on singleness might be said to rely on an experiential model of identity, although as with other models this is more often implicit than fully explored. Unlike the other frameworks discussed, there is not a coherent body of work setting out the experiential model, but it can be argued that a lot of important work is encompassed

within a broadly experiential perspective. Richard Stevens suggests that phenomenological, existential and humanistic perspectives have in common a focus on subjective experience (Stevens, 1996).

Basic assumptions of experiential models

A phenomenological perspective involves trying to understand human awareness as we experience it. The basic assumption is that what people are feeling and experiencing is the most significant information. For existentialists the capacity to reflect on our own experience of being a person is vital. The basic assumption here is that there is a dynamic quality to human existence. Existentialists believe that we are able to choose our thoughts and actions and in doing so we create who we are, and search for meaning in life.

Humanistic psychology focuses on finding ways to help people become more aware of their feelings and experiences. Stevens identifies three key features in these approaches to identity:

- to be a person is to experience oneself as existing in the world
- to be a person is to be an active intentional agent who engages with, and can influence the world
- to be a person is to possess reflexive awareness (adapted from Stevens, 1996, p. 153).

Literature on singleness and experiential models

It is not surprising that the experiential model has found a home in the growing literature on singleness. The focus on subjective experience can offer the promise that women's voices and experiences can be heard without an intervening interpretation of what these experiences really mean. As Gilligan's empirical work has shown, women often have different modes of describing their relationships and identity (Gilligan, 1982). In a period when women appear to be discovering new ways of living, according to some, without reliance on traditional roles and scripts (Reilly, 1996; Clements, 1998), it seems appropriate to explore what these new experiences have meant to those undertaking them.

The strengths of the women's movement had much to do with the sharing of experience,

and efforts to formulate understanding and theory from grass-roots personal experience. Consciousness-raising groups explicitly sought to discover commonalities in women's experience, and 'the personal is political' encapsulates this approach. An experiential approach to understanding and accounting for identity can be a powerful force for change.

An experiential approach to understanding the identity of women alone will treat women as able to reflect on their experience of singleness and to extract meaning from this experience. It will assume that women find different meanings in the state of singleness, but that there will be nevertheless some common themes in what different women say, and that it will be possible to conceptualise from these themes to say something sensible about the state in general. There are, however, questions about how far, and when, singleness is considered by individual women to be salient for them.

An experiential approach will depict women alone as able to make choices and act autonomously in the light of their experience and their feelings about their experience. It will treat their understandings as worthy of fuller exploration by themselves, and credit single women with the ability to change and adapt to their singleness. An experiential approach will not look for meanings that are beyond the awareness or grasp of the individual women.

In a broad sense all of the qualitative and ethnographic research on single women draws on an experiential model insofar as it assumes that the women can make sense of and comment on their experience. In a brief article Dalton describes the explicitly phenomenological research design she used to explore the meanings of singleness to women who have never married (Dalton, 1992). The phenomenological principle she adopts is that because everyone experiences life in a unique way, reality is subjective, and can be understood only from the viewpoint of the individual. However, her theoretical framework is of little help in theorising the different meanings of singleness. Having come up with thirteen categories of meanings for singleness – such as singleness as self-reliance, singleness as a burden, as openness, as self-acceptance and so on – she argues that women

experience different aspects of singleness, but that furthermore, individuals experience all these aspects at once. It is helpful to acknowledge the contradictions in women's understandings of their identity as single, but there is an impetus in this work to adjudicate over which are the more faithful descriptions. Descriptions have meaning in the contexts within which they are used, and in my view a more useful approach would be to try to understand the contexts of the women's narratives and the resources they draw on for their multiple descriptions.

There are several authors who use a form of presentation which has more in common with journalism than a research study, and use case studies of the women talked to, where they present pen pictures of individual women, supplemented by occasional direct quotes. The work by Peterson, (1981), Anderson *et al.*, (1995) and Reilly, (1996) is all of this nature, and the work is organised into a framework of themes pursued in different chapters with commentary from the authors. The authors make explicit use of their own experience as single women to different degrees.

Reilly (1996) describes women who have reached their late twenties discovering that their identity is in flux as they realise that their expectations of marriage may not pan out (1996, p. 49). She argues that there are difficulties in making an identity without the usual script and the usual structures. She says that self-help books are little help since they get stuck on the first question that most women ask: *'What's wrong with me?'*

Reilly argues that the popular explorers of adult life have left women, particularly 'ever-single' women, out of their discussion. She critiques Erikson (Erikson, 1969), and developments of his work such as the influential *Passages* (Sheehy, 1976), as ignoring the specific issues that face women over marriage. Reilly suggests that for a woman, her resolution of the crisis of intimacy versus isolation often means presenting a false self, living in a partnership in which she has less economic and social power, and may mean engaging in self-denial as she grooms her identity, appearance and behaviour to meet the needs of her partner and the family they create together. Meanwhile she buries her real

self and her real feelings.

The option for women who remain single, Reilly advises, is often passivity, delaying full adult identity for as long as possible in the hope that the rite of passage will finally allow entry into full married adulthood. Alternatively women may write substitute scripts – these may involve serial projects that offer fulfilling roles. Either has its problems, according to Reilly – passivity can mean collusion with others in not facing the scriptless life head on, and feeling that intimate others really know very little of the single woman's life. Serial projects involving challenging work or caring roles can lead to exhaustion, and similarly mean not facing up to grief over the loss of a dream.

Thus far there is much in common in Reilly's analysis with that of Lewis and Moon and others who favour a life cycle approach. In the place of life tasks or stages she identifies a point for many single women where their singleness became 'singularity' (as I discussed in Chapter 1). Reilly describes this as a personal and individual journey, different for different women, but at some point involving dumping the line '*What's wrong with me?*' and substituting it with '*What am I going to do?*' (1996, pp. 66–67).

The area of distinction in what I have characterised here as an experiential approach, is in the emphasis on women's capacity to reflect for themselves on what they want from life and to come up with answers. This contrasts with models that may be delivered through self-help books or through therapy, but which impose a structure of stages or tasks that need to be accomplished. Reilly suggests that her stories of singular women offer all women a different kind of feminine narrative. One which is in many ways accidental and messy, but never the less existing in the midst of a 'culture that portrays its women as dependent and passive, as happy only in marriage, as productive only in motherhood, as potent and interesting only in youth' (1996, p. 200).

There are some tensions between the social scientist's need to present some patterns in their material, and the inevitable proliferation of possibilities that different stories of experience produce. Books like Reilly's succeed or fail insofar as they present a more or

less coherent account through the interpretation that the author chooses to put on the different stories, which may also mean some distortion of the experience as lived and understood by the respondent. In the main, however, this kind of work is undertheorised, with the representation of experience presented as unproblematic.

Marcelle Clements, (1998) presents clusters of excerpts edited down and organised into themes, preceded by an introduction in which she says she attempts less to answer the questions raised by respondents than to offer a parallel commentary. The result is quite messy, and hard to make sense of or evaluate, with very scanty descriptions of each speaker, which do little to locate them in the reader's mind. The process of reproducing quotations without much commentary may give a more direct account from the respondent, but since they are edited down these are in no way verbatim texts. The tidying up process may have removed a lot of inconsistency and contradiction. The lack of theorising directly from the different accounts renders them anecdotal and means that there is little direct connection with Clements' 'parallel commentary'.

Clements has some interesting arguments but does not pin down her evidence for rather sweeping statements. She comments that single women have no collective sense of being a pivotal social force, there is no subculture or movement to provide definition. There is thus, for many single women, 'no constructed awareness of this new trajectory' (1998, p. 33).

I have already referred to the more conventionally academic ethnographic approach adopted by Tuula Gordon, (1994). Her theoretical discussion is illustrated by quotations from her respondents, organised in thematic chapters. However, the effect of her approach, which collects up like examples in order to support a point, is to iron out difference. Because brief quotations are taken out of context to reinforce majority views, there is in this work again little sense of what these comments might mean for an individual woman in the context of her life as a whole.

Gordon describes herself as interested in research that '*gives a voice*' (1994, p. 41 – her

emphasis). Her aim was that 'interviews and the analysis form interlocking sets of narratives: my narrative is one of selection and interpretation, but not of silencing' (1994, p. 41). It is an attractive idea to give a voice to women who, according also to Clements (1998), have no collective sense of themselves. Perhaps the degree to which this can be done depends on what the overall purpose is. An experiential approach can help people transform their own lives, or that at least is the supposition that informs existentialism and humanistic psychology. The kind of understanding that others can gain from the voices of a few will always be uncertain. Whether voices are presented directly or mediated and summarised, there is always a filter of selection and representation which is liable to distort or misinform.

I have referred earlier to Bickerton's (1983) work as making use of a psychodynamic model. She also draws on experiential models. The workshops that she ran for women alone used experiential exercises to enable women to work on various issues. The effect was of consciousness raising and support. As with the consciousness-raising groups of the women's movement, Bickerton's workshops are based on the assumption that there are commonalities for women on their own, and that these can be usefully shared in discussion and reflected upon. Perhaps surprisingly, it is rare to find such reference in the literature to more formal groups of single women coming together for the purpose of sharing experience. It appears that this kind of support between women on their own is more often based on very informal networks, and may not be particularly recognised as being focused on an identity of singleness. This again raises questions concerning meanings of singleness, who considers themselves or is considered by others to be single, and in what circumstances this is seen as a salient identity.

In summary, the use of experiential models in literature on singleness has some strength in exploring aspects of the lives of women alone, in recognising the different ways in which women make sense of their experience through their individual accounts, and in drawing attention to messiness, complexity and variation in such experiences. There is, however, a tension between presenting snapshots of experience which are left to speak for themselves

and are under-theorised, and in collating and categorising experience in ways which may distort, or conceal difference. There may also be a tendency to assume that there is something pure and untainted about experience that gives access to the 'truth'. It is important to remember that what can be collected are women's reflections on their experience. These reflections are themselves the product of social interpretations. They tell us about the kinds of thoughts which women are encouraged to have as a result of the social context in which they live. Joan Scott has pointed to the theoretical and political need for experience to be deconstructed, and for the analysis to be situated:

Experience is at once always already an interpretation *and* something that needs to be interpreted. What counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested, and always therefore political.

(Scott, 1991, p. 797)

This aspect of the experiential model, also illuminated by Weedon (1987), forms the contribution of women's subjective experience to feminist politics. As such it provides a context for my own analysis. Weedon argues that rather than subjectivity providing a coherent and authoritative interpretation of 'reality', a useful theory needs to make use of the subjective, and to show where women's experience comes from, and how it relates to material social practices and the power relations that structure them (Weedon, 1987).

While Reilly (1996) and Clements (1998) suggest that single women are 'scriptless', without the usual structures, or any collective sense of themselves, they do not examine through empirical work the conversational structures employed by their participants nor the wider cultural resources drawn upon in social interaction. My own work aims to fill this gap with detailed analysis of patterns in interpretative resources used by participants in my research. Are there some 'scripts' that women alone return to again and again? Another possibility that the tradition of experiential accounts offers to my analysis is the particular kind of narrative they exemplify. In order to describe their experience of life alone, what narrative traditions can and do women draw on? Are there some commonly accepted ways of parcelling up and accounting for experience, or are women finding new ways of describing their lives?

Developing an approach to single identity as discursively constructed

I have discussed how different theoretical models of identity appear in the empirical social science literature on singleness. To some extent I have exaggerated the use of the models in the literature discussed, in order to draw out the implications of these models in illuminating the nature of singleness for women. I have found each of the models discussed in some way deficient in giving a proper account of the self that works well in thinking about singleness. Much of the theorising involves quite individualised and psychologising ways of thinking about singleness. As I remarked in Chapter 1, this focus places the responsibility for coping with or transforming singleness upon the individual. All too easily this can lead to seeing the issues of singleness as aspects of personal deficit. In the remainder of this thesis I aim to develop a theoretical approach that is more truly social psychological, and which recognises more fully the public issues without always turning back to private troubles as the focus for action.

In contrast to the models I have described, the model that I seek to develop dissolves the firm division between society and the individual. Instead of assuming that individuals are separate and self-contained, and that they can be considered in a way detached from the social context I view the self as the result of a continuously changing and fluid history of relationships (Wetherell and Maybin, 1996; Gergen, 1999). Bruner argues that the self has to be seen as 'distributed': made up of many daily practices such as people's work, friendships, writing, letters, diaries and daily communications, in locations well beyond the boundary of their physical bodies (Bruner, 1990). Individuals are *social beings*, who use socially developed resources in producing their own communications and understandings. In this sense society and individual are the same thing, viewed from a different angle (Burkitt, 1991).

In arguing that the individual and the social cannot be separated, Robert Connell (1987) maintains that there is no such thing as individual practice, there is only collective practice:

A personal life is a path through a field of practices which are following a range of collective logics and responding to a range of structural conditions which routinely intersect and often contradict each other.

(Connell, 1987, p. 222)

For Connell personality is practice, seen from the perspective of the life history. People do experience themselves in terms of a life trajectory – but even though we may conceive of this as a life cycle, it is *not* cyclical and personal history is *not* unfolding. Instead it is something we make – a construction. I follow Connell in understanding ‘identity’ not as a consistent and fixed entity, determined from early childhood, but as something more fluid and adaptive to the changing circumstances of a life. We do not have ‘identity’ we have ‘identity projects’ (Connell, 1987).

There are aspects of the models of identity discussed in this chapter that I do find helpful. I will make use of these in developing a theoretical perspective that sees identity as a project rather than something fixed. These aspects are all linked to *social practices*. I find the notion of a set of practices around being a person a more fruitful way of conceptualising singleness. Such practice can be thought of as *psycho-discursive* (Wetherell and Edley, 1999) – occurring in talk and also implicating a psychology as the speaker develops a sense of self through the different subject positions taken up. Singleness then becomes something that people *do*, while making full use of their own capacity to extract meaning from their actions and the actions of those around them. The models that I have found in the empirical literature on singleness are ones that single women may draw on in making sense of their lives and use in working on their own identity project. In this sense, they form a powerful influence on how singleness is experienced. The process is not, however, a matter of discovery of a pre-existing ‘single identity’ or consistent core of self. Instead it involves multiply constructed identities, or identifications, across intersecting and antagonist discourses, practices and positions (Hall, 2000).

Valerie Walkerdine looks at the cultural images available to young girls and how they use these images to position themselves (Walkerdine, 1990). She describes the powerful social

practices that regulate women's behaviour from childhood, for instance through families and schooling. The possible positions that an individual may take are embedded in these social practices. While I do not follow Walkerdine in wishing to explore the part played by the unconscious in making use of cultural images I consider that single women are aware of the cultural representations of singleness, such as those described in these literature reviews. My argument is that women do not accept these images uncritically, but work with the cultural material they have been given, and use it creatively in their accounts of themselves.

From the perspective of an identity project, singleness is not something that is a given and which fixes us, but is something which we work with. We do have scripts, but these are occasioned by particular contexts and for particular conversational moments. We have stories and narratives through which we make some sense of our lives – and we do this often in psychological terms. The idea of an identity project is of course also a cultural construction and ideas about what 'counts' as a good identity play their part, as well as typical discursive practices of what makes a good story. The identity project is then something that people work up in their talk. To argue this involves seeing talk as an active medium that actually creates different possible identities, rather than being simply a window into some inner 'real' self. People's talk, their discourse, is social action (Wetherell, 2001b).

It is through ordinary conversational practices that we become who we are, but I do not expect this to be a consistent creation through which a single authentic self is conveyed. Instead it is a patchwork of possibilities, that draws on familiar as well as changing cultural representations, and which acquire new meanings as these resources are used in different contexts (Wetherell, 2001b). Women position themselves through their talk as strong and independent, or perhaps at times as lonely or needy, creating different *subject positions* (Davies and Harré, 1990), or different identities, that become relevant for that moment in a conversation.

I have outlined in this section the general theoretical approach of the self as discursively constructed that I take in this thesis. I introduce further in Chapter 3 the analytical tools that I use, such as 'subject position', following approaches developed in critical discursive psychology (Wetherell, 1998; Edley, 2001). A fuller description is given in Chapter 4, and that chapter and the following three empirical chapters demonstrate in detail how my theoretical commitments are translated into analysis.

Conclusion

This review of models of identity in the empirical literature on singleness has sought to highlight some embedded assumptions concerning the subjectivity of the single woman. According to the different theoretical stances, the single woman is nagged, braced and cajoled to develop herself in particular ways. She is adjured to improve her negotiation of life stages and appropriate tasks for singleness. She is exhorted to deal with her conscious and unconscious feelings about growing up as her mother's daughter, her fears of dependency, loss and closeness. She is expected to learn and draw inspiration from the self-evident and untarnished 'truths' of other women's experience.

These models of a single woman's identity form an important part of the cultural context within which women pursue their personal identity projects, as I will demonstrate when I discuss my own data. My own description of the single woman is of someone who is capable of drawing on a wide range of common sense and more theoretical discussions on singleness in making sense of her situation. She is able to work with the contradictory cultural material that she is presented with and develop her own situated responses and interventions with which she constructs and fashions her identity. The task of this thesis is to look at this process through examination of the identity work which takes place in the interviews with participants in my study.

CHAPTER 3

Performance of identity in interviews: methodology and methods

Being Single Is
drying a wishbone
by the kitchen window
'til the bone is chipped
to bits by trinkets
placed beside it,
or it rots, because

there is no one
to take one end
you the other
pulling, wishing
each against each
until the bone
breaks

(Richardson, 1994, p. 5)

Introduction

In the previous chapters I have explained my interest in the changing meanings of singleness and in the kind of subjectivity that these imply for women alone. I have argued for an understanding of singleness as socially constructed. Rather than being a natural fact, singleness varies over time and culture. Particular modes of representation of the single state dominate social organisation at particular moments. Flowing from this understanding is my focus on the discursive context of singleness. The ways of thinking about singleness that are commonly available provide a set of resources that can be drawn on by women who are on their own, and shaped to their own ends. I am therefore interested in how women work up a single identity in their conversational practices.

As I outlined in the Introduction to this thesis, I have several central research questions. I am interested in how women on their own make sense of, and talk about, singleness and relationships, and how new and different cultural resources may interweave with historical discourses of the women's place. Given the continuity of 'choice' as a theme in literature on singleness, I want to know how agency and choice are understood by women and conveyed in their accounts of remaining or becoming single, and what power relations structure their experience of singleness. What kind of strategies help women either to fit neatly into the cultural slots for singleness or to put up some resistance to them? What kind of rhetorical work is involved in working with the culturally devalued and stigmatised aspects of singleness? The nature of these questions led me to the potential of discourse

analysis as a tool for exploring women's conversation, and to interviews as a method for gathering data.

In this chapter I explain what I mean by discourse analysis and discuss the traditions drawn on by the approach I take. I provide an account and a rationale for the methods that I used to generate data.

A discourse analytic approach

I wanted to look at how women on their own made sense of their situations in their talk and conversation. I have asserted that singleness needs to be studied as a discourse and I have explained a little of how I think it works as a discourse, but what is implied in discourse analysis as a research approach? Two broad statements that apply to various kinds of discourse research are that it is the study of language in use and the study of human meaning-making (Wetherell *et al.*, 2001). Discourse analysis provides a way of examining how important aspects of social life are carried out. An underpinning notion for all discourse analysts is that discourse is social action. Discourse is constitutive: it constructs and formulates the object or events which are being discussed rather than simply providing a neutral picture of them. Discourse involves work: speech is used to persuade, to present a particular version of affairs, it is oriented to other possible versions. Discourse is co-produced: meaning emerges because of a generally shared cultural context within which distinctive associations are made, through more local uses in context by speakers, and through the co-operation of the participants who speak together (Wetherell, 2001b).

Traditions in discourse analysis

In order to extend my description of discourse analysis, I will briefly review some different traditions in this field before describing my own approach, which is a synthesis drawn from several theoretical traditions. The range of traditions of discourse research is diverse, spanning conversational analysis, Foucauldian research, critical discourse analysis and critical linguistics, discursive psychology, Bakhtinian research and interactional

sociolinguistics and the ethnography of speaking (Wetherell, 2001a). Two that have been prominent in the development of the field for social psychology are those that draw on conversational analysis (CA) and those that are influenced by the work of Foucault. I will introduce CA first and then briefly describe some discourse analysis in the Foucauldian tradition.

CA is a sociological approach to discourse analysis which has developed from the work of Goffman on social interaction, Garfinkel's ethnomethodology and the work of Sacks and colleagues. Goffman drew attention to the logic of interaction, that it has an order and that the relationship of the acts between persons was worthy of study in its own right (Heritage, 2001). Garfinkel explored the shared methods of reasoning that people use to recognise what others are saying and doing. Working from these intellectual resources, CA has emerged as an approach that uncovers the normative practices through which ordinary interaction is managed. Conversation analysts study the minutiae of naturally occurring conversations looking for the systematic properties of a particular phenomenon (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). For instance, the sequential positioning of speakers' utterances, the range of possible responses, the overall structure of conversations and the repair of difficulties in speaking, hearing and understanding talk are all areas that have been studied (Heritage, 2001).

Analysis is typically applied to written texts. For conversations, including interviews, the transcripts of recorded conversations are the texts studied. Some conversation analysts study 'institutional talk', but many give primacy to more everyday 'casual talk' (Edwards, 1997). In casual talk, also referred to as naturally occurring talk, it is claimed that there is no obvious asymmetry between participants, no pre-assigned turns at talking, participants are more free to choose and change topic, and topics are often local or personal. However, it is not necessarily easy to obtain pure examples of such talk for study. The notion that ordinary conversation or mundane talk is somehow free of institutional structures has also been critiqued, as has the lack of clarity in defining it (Billig, 1999).

Discourse analysis that draws on Foucault's work has typically been more concerned with the workings of power. The interest is in how language is organised in a culture so that particular ways of understanding are the ones that are taken for granted. For instance, Wendy Hollway (1984) theorises the practices and meanings that re-produce gendered subjectivity. She explores, for example, why men choose to position themselves as subject to the discourse of male sexual drive, and why women continue to position themselves as its objects (Hollway, 1984). In another example of Foucauldian research, Stuart Hall (1997) addresses how representations of people seen as racially different are used to fix meanings and encapsulate a chain of associations that are demeaning to black people (Hall, 1997a).

A more synthetic approach

My own approach follows that developed by Margaret Wetherell and Jonathan Potter (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell and Potter, 1988; 1992). The aim is to blend the insights of conversation analysis with those of Foucault, giving attention to both the concern with participants' sense-making in social interactions and the use of broad cultural resources that are often taken for granted (Wetherell and Edley, 1999). The approach involves examining what resources people use, or make relevant, in accounting for their actions. It assumes that people *do* things with their language and that the way people speak does much more than simply convey a picture of what they are describing. Critical discursive social psychology is concerned with the logic of accountability while also describing the collective and social patterning of background normative conceptions and their social and psychological consequences (Wetherell, 1998).

Variability in people's talk can be problematic for researchers who are looking for broad themes that can be extracted from data. People often contradict themselves and this may be suppressed in some thematic research accounts which instead focus on the dominant view in a person's account, and look for consistency in the person, rather than noting moments of hesitation or contradiction (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). In this approach to

discourse analysis variability within accounts is an important area for analysis since it can reveal cultural contradictions in the resources that those talking are drawing upon.

Analytic concepts such as interpretative repertoires (Potter and Wetherell, 1987), ideological dilemmas (Billig *et al.*, 1988) and subject positions (Davies and Harré, 1990) are key to this synthesis of different traditions, and I give a brief explanation of these terms when I discuss my data analysis towards the end of this chapter.

There are some epistemological and methodological problems in developing a synthesis of approaches that have emerged from contrasting theoretical underpinnings, to which a debate between contributors to *Discourse & Society* has drawn attention (Schegloff, 1997b; 1998; Wetherell, 1998; Billig, 1999; Schegloff, 1999). Writing from a CA perspective, Schegloff argues that, without more attention to participants' concerns in their analytic procedures, critical discourse analysts lose a close connection to their data and produce arguments that are merely ideological. Wetherell (1998) acknowledges the commonly accepted distinctions between analysis that is fine grain and concerned with the action orientation of talk and that which is more focused on discourse, power and subjectification. She advocates, none the less, for an eclectic approach that draws on both traditions as the most productive basis for discourse work in social psychology. I accept Wetherell's arguments for an inclusive approach, which recognises the occasioned and contextualised nature of participants' talk as well as the social and political consequences of discursive patterning. I attempt to make use of both traditions in my own analysis, and the nature of the resolution of issues in combining approaches will become apparent in the empirical chapters of this thesis.

Generating relevant research data

Some of the sites for gathering discourse data in this tradition are naturally occurring in the sense that the 'discursive event' would have happened whether or not the researcher was present. It is also possible for researchers to set up interviews as discursive events for the explicit purpose of studying how language is used and how meaning-making is carried out by the participants (Wetherell *et al.*, 2001, p. 3). This can be through using a focus

group approach or one based on a more standard one-to-one interview.

I was interested in how women talked about singleness, and what their talk showed of their construction of a single identity in social interaction. I needed data where women talked about being single. The opportunities to collect naturally occurring data seemed limited. Also, unlike some conversation analytic research where the talk is the focus and the topic of conversation is unimportant, I had a dual focus both on topic and on how talk was organised. Jennifer Coates (1996) collected data on how women friends talk together through recording groups of friends: in the first place a group of her own friends. While I could have approached my study in a similar way, this would not necessarily have given me data that addressed singleness as a topic.

On the other hand, I did not want simply to focus on talk 'about' singleness. I wanted to see women 'doing singleness' in action. A key issue for me has been the situations in which singleness becomes salient, and how data could be collected from such situations. I considered the possibilities for setting up 'focus' or discussion groups either for single women only or for mixed groups, married and single. An area of interest was the stigma attached to singleness and how this might be enacted and dealt with in talk. Mixed groups might have offered opportunities for seeing singleness in interaction with coupledness. I was concerned, however, that the enactment of stigma was a sensitive area and that potential participants could feel threatened by the prospect of mixed groups set up for the purposes of exploring stigma in interaction.

I did one pilot of a group approach when I persuaded a group of single, female friends who were staying with me to allow me to tape record us talking on the theme of what being single meant to us. This proved a valuable approach for generating different meanings of singleness and the interpretative resources that we drew on. It was less fruitful for exploring agency and choice, which seemed to require more of a personal narrative of how one came to be single. I could ask individuals to talk about past relationships, but this was more difficult to handle sharing time fairly in a group format. The complications of

bringing together several women, finding a time and venue for meeting, dealing with issues of confidentiality and transcribing more complex conversational interaction were also problematic and beyond my limited budget.

An alternative approach was to set up individual interviews as discursive events, and this is what I chose to do. As participants, interviewer and interviewed draw on their cultural knowledge, including knowledge of interviews as a recognised form of social interaction, as well as, in the case of my own interviews, knowledge about how women alone routinely speak. Participants' accounts and responses are 'locally' organised as relevant to the context in which they are participating, in interviews as in other more casual conversations. Their talk is social action. In interviews, participants demonstrate how they assign sense and meaning to the category of 'singleness'. There is a sense, then, in which interviews set up with the purpose of exploring singleness, will also be showing something of how singleness is done.

Selection of participants

My aim was to interview women who either thought of themselves as single, or who might be categorised in this way by others. I thought about limiting the sample to women who were childless, never married and heterosexual. However, given the complexity of defining singleness, as discussed in the Introduction, I did not want to fix the category too narrowly, nor to determine in advance of an interview process that a more inclusive range of women were 'really' single according to my own definition. A narrow definition would also have brought difficulties in its operation, since at the selection point details of sexual orientation, who has children and whether there are previous marriages are not always clear. I liked the term 'women alone' (Bickerton, 1983) for its applicability to a broad range of women in differing circumstances, and because (for me at least) it did not carry a set of stigmatising associations.

My criteria for inclusion in the sample were that women had either remained single, or been divorced, separated or widowed for more than two years; were not living with anyone

(male or female) in an intimate partnership at the time of making contact; and were aged between 30 and 60 years. Even with these quite broad parameters I was working within some commonly understood meanings of singleness, partnership and age: for instance that partnership requires cohabitation, and that singleness or aloneness 'matter' in an age-related way.

The sample was recruited through 'snowballing' and through poster and handout advertisements. I contacted women known to me who I thought might fit my criteria and be willing to be interviewed, and asked them also to pass on an information handout to others. Handouts and posters were displayed in libraries, shops and other public places asking 'women alone' to participate in a study of meanings of 'singleness'. These notices explained that I was myself single, and that I was interested in knowing 'what being single means to you now, what it has meant to you in the past, what kind of choices you have made, and your hopes for the future' (Appendix 1).

Roger Sapsford and Pamela Abbott advocate randomness in picking participants, and caution that reliance on snowball sampling risks the bias of only getting access to people who are already known to others through just one network. The researcher then does not reach those who are more isolated, or potentially excludes a whole set of people who might be linked in some different, but salient, way (Sapsford and Abbott, 1992). I was not aiming to get a representative sample: this would be difficult in any case with a sample of the size I was able to work with. Indeed, my topic required considerable limitation, in terms of being women only, and women who were on their own. I was aiming for a 'typical' category of women with a broadly shared social position. There are arguments for snowballing as the most effective way to reach potential participants of this type who are not part of a formed, pre-existing group. In addition, the two-pronged approach of placing posters in public places as well as snowballing meant that there was also a degree of randomness built into my selection process.

Thirty women were included in the study. Of these, 21 women were selected as a result of

the snowballing process: 12 of these had been contacted directly by me in the first place. Nine women were included who made contact because they had seen a poster, or picked up a handout. The typical demographic profile of the participants did not vary significantly across the two methods of recruiting, although the poster/handout approach was successful in reaching two black participants and two of the younger members of my sample. The research was mainly carried out in London, a city in south-west England, and in rural areas of the Cotswolds.

Appendix 2 shows the sample by age grouping, occupation, parenting status and by their status as 'always single' (19 participants) or 'single again' (which refers to those who have been married previously – 11 participants). The majority of women interviewed were relatively homogenous in terms of social class, ethnicity and educational background (mainly middle-class, white, owner-occupiers and British), with considerable variation in current employment and income. Ten of the sample were in the 45–49 years age band, and there were six each in the five-year bands on either side of this one, so in terms of age people were clustered in the middle to upper age limits of my criteria. This was fortuitous, rather than by design, and arguably may have been linked to the snowballing approach.

The aim was to work in depth and to develop a rich or 'thick' understanding of a relatively small sample with a broadly shared social position rather than, for example, conduct a questionnaire survey which would have allowed a 'thinner' exploration of a much more diverse sample. In my view the relative homogeneity of my sample was a strength, rather than a disadvantage, but there were also some distinctive differences in experience. Two participants had disabilities. Eight of the sample had children, in four cases these children were grown adults living in separate households at the time of the interview, and, apart from one person in the 35–39 bracket, all the mothers were over 45 years. Three of the mothers with children under ten years had never married. Two participants were black. Most participants referred to heterosexual experience, one person identified herself as lesbian and two referred to having had relationships with women as well as men.

There is a historic link between a class of rising professional women and singleness, and this is something of an argument for focusing predominantly on middle class women. However, there are difficulties in making firm class categorisations of women who have remained single, which reflect both the degree to which class relates to male status and the financial difficulties associated with single motherhood. My aim was not to look for representativeness or comparability across different class or other boundaries; the most important aspect was to select women who fitted my broad description of 'women alone'. Like Ruthellen Josselson, in her follow-up study of college-educated women, I wanted to reach those who 'represent a group of women who are not studied, reported about, or understood often' (Josselson, 1987, p. 41).

The kind of claims or evidence that discourse analysis can substantiate relate to a shared cultural context, so from this perspective what participants share is more important than a range of contrasting backgrounds. My analysis will not attempt to make broad empirical generalisations or identify universal processes, but instead will look at the particular features of the local context – the interviews – in noting patterns or contrasts which occurred (see also Gill, 1993). I do not treat interviews as giving access to participants' thoughts, opinions and experiences in a straightforward way, but instead consider them as contexts for making meaning. Nor do I take a 'factist' perspective on how reality is represented in the data, but rather a 'specimen' perspective, so that ways of presenting oneself are part of the reality being studied (ten Have, 2004). From looking at the kind of cultural resources that participants in my study made use of, it should be possible to make some extrapolations that help in an understanding of how discourses of the single identity structure the experience of a wider range of women (see also Edley, 2001).

The possibilities for generalisation from a focus on interaction shown in interview data from a relatively small sample are different from those that may be possible where large samples are involved. The generalisation that I can undertake is not on a statistical basis, but in relation to the use of shared social resources, which are recognisable to participants (Taylor, 2001). One approach, which I employ in Chapters 4 and 6, is to consider

rhetorical features that recur within and across different interviews and locate these in relation to wider cultural resources, and patterns in the positions or identities these create for participants. Another approach is to identify patterns common to many different interactions, such as the sequencing or properties of the 'turns' taken by speakers (Taylor, 2001), and I use this approach in Chapter 7.

Interviews

It has been suggested that we live in an 'interview society' (Atkinson and Silverman, 1997), and that the interview is a normatively organised device for revealing social structure that is itself worthy as a topic for investigation (Silverman, 1973). Interviews are a particular kind of talk. People who take part in interviews are generally likely to have some idea of what is expected in an interview situation, based on previous experience either of taking part in them or from witnessing interviews presented through different media. The interview is a category of activity that participants can employ to recognise interactional situations and to guide their behaviour in them (Shakespeare, 1998).

There are different interview formats, such as ethnographic interviews, medical interviews, survey research interviews or media interviews. Each of these varies in some ways, and Pamela Shakespeare (1998) notes that different participants may orient to different formats, and that it is possible for some interview events to have a mixed or ambiguous character.

I was interviewing a mixture of women already known to me and of women who were complete strangers. The proportion of women already known to me was in fact slightly higher than suggested by the breakdown above of methods of recruitment. I had met before, in other contexts, three women 'passed on' to me by friends, and one woman who answered my advertisement. So, approximately half of my sample were women I already had at least some acquaintance with. In some traditions of research this would doubtless be seen as a problem, hampering objectivity in interviewing procedures and in reporting findings (French, 1993). Oakley (1981) criticises such concerns as belonging to a masculine

paradigm of research that does not replicate what really goes on in interviews. In my proposed approach of a discursive analysis prior acquaintance with participants seemed likely to facilitate the shared use of familiar cultural resources and jointly constructed conversation that I was hoping for. However, there were some areas where care was needed, and I discuss these under the heading of 'ethical issues'.

I was able to interview with the status, to some extent, of an 'insider' (Adler and Adler, 1987). Literature on 'membership roles', for instance that of the Chicago School, often refers to participant observation, and membership of a group, with an assumption that the field to be researched contains identifiable groups or subcultures, which one can 'enter' and 'exit'. The aim is to gain an understanding of that social world through studying the perspectives of the members themselves. The advice to researchers is to interact directly and naturalistically with the people they are interested in (Adler and Adler, 1987).

According to the typology of researcher roles in this tradition, my role is somewhere between 'participant-as-observer' and 'complete participant'. Oakley problematises this conception of participant observation for women:

A feminist interviewing women is by definition both 'inside' the culture and participating in that which she is observing. ...It requires, further, that the mythology of 'hygienic' research with its accompanying mystification of the research and the researched as objective instruments of data production be replaced by the recognition that personal involvement is more than dangerous bias – it is the condition under which people come to know each other and to admit others into their lives.

(Oakley, 1981, pp. 57–58)

Like Oakley, I was already 'inside' the culture I was seeking to study, at least insofar as 'women alone' can be said to form an identifiable group, which was also something I was hoping to discover. The notion of an 'entrance' or an 'exit' from membership does not capture my experience. However, in relation to singleness, any 'group' is a virtual one, and the shifting boundaries of categorisation make it difficult to know who might be considered to belong, which is why I opted for self-selection in recruiting participants. Self-selection also applied to me, as I categorised myself as a woman alone and single. While it did not appear that I needed to negotiate entrance to membership of the group I wished to study, there is a sense in which 'exit' has occurred, which I discuss below under

the heading 'Ending interviews, exiting membership'.

There are warnings in relation to excessive involvement, and the risks of influencing the phenomena that the researcher seeks to study (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983). Another problem suggested by Schutz (1962, cited by Adler and Adler, 1987, p. 23), is that of assuming the 'natural attitude' of members, and as a result of involvement, taking for granted ongoing activities and meanings. For the purposes of my discursive analysis the issue for me was not so much over assuming a natural attitude in interviews. Indeed, it was important to come to the interviews with some shared membership with participants as another woman alone. The issue became more critical at the analytic stage, when I needed to make my interview data sufficiently 'strange' to myself to be able to reflect on the taken-for-granted actions in our talk (Schuetz, 1944, 1945).

I identified myself as a single woman, and shared some features such as cultural and class background with many of the sample. I articulated my 'membership role' in my initial information about the project, and in my approach to interviewing, where I sometimes used my own experience as an example of issues I was wanting to explore. I hoped that a degree of openness about my own situation would avoid reproducing a situation where women who define themselves as single are constantly put on the spot to explain their 'oddity'. While I generally refer to those interviewed as 'participants', I recognise that I was also a participant in the discussion and the resulting discourse was jointly constructed. In relation to both the group discussion with friends and the one-to-one interviews my intention was to treat myself as one of the objects of study. I was drawing on and constructing a discourse together with the participants. This meant that at times I was more active in the conversation than might traditionally be expected of a social science researcher. I assumed that we were articulating some shared cultural beliefs, and that it might be possible to tease out more precisely what these were and how we made use of them through close analysis searching for patterns in our conversations.

Pilot interviews and developing a framework

I regarded my first two interviews as 'pilots', giving me an opportunity to find out whether I had identified fruitful areas for discussion, and to check how long the interviews took. I learned several useful points from these interviews: one concerned the overall framework of areas for discussion. I identified that two of the main areas of questioning I followed were on interactional issues and on relationships, and that these seemed to work well together, and with some small adjustments and additions should yield interesting data in relation to my broad research aims. Other areas on where and how participants gained emotional support, and on issues for therapists, policy-makers and service providers in relation to single women seemed less well integrated into my main aims and research focus, and less generally productive, and I decided not to continue with these in the main body of interviews. Instead, I introduced questions on ideas and attitudes: whether participants found feminism a useful resource, and whether there was a 'politics of singleness'. This was in order to get at their local and personal understandings of the broader social significance of their position.

The pilot interviews also highlighted the subjectivity and fluidity of self-definitions of singleness. One participant thought that she might not be single now, she could not be sure but things might be about to change. She had just made contact again with a former lover, and thought this might presage a revival of their relationship on what promised to be a better footing from her point of view. This later proved not to be the case. The other described herself as definitely single: 'a classic case', although she did see herself as having a partner. Their relationship was on a weekends-only basis because of the distance of their living and working arrangements. He later moved jobs and came to live with her, and they have since married.

The feedback that I got from one of the pilot participants also helped me immensely in thinking about how I needed to avoid heteronormative assumptions in the interviews. The participant told me that she had not chosen to be single, but had not chosen an

alternative: she had just stayed as she was. Later she referred to having always wanted to keep her options open. I asked about relationships that might have led to marriage or a long-term commitment and she spoke of relationships with men. When I checked with her at the end of the interview whether there was anything else she thought we should talk about, she spoke of having relationships with women as well as men. This was what keeping her options open had meant to her. My earlier question appeared to have been heard as a question about marriage and marriage-type partnerships, hence not an invitation to talk about same-sex relationships. It was very helpful to have my attention drawn to the need for opportunities for participants to talk about whatever kinds of relationships they chose to. As a result, in subsequent one-to-one interviews I asked each participant to tell me about important relationships in her life and to give her understanding of how she had got to where she was now.

I prepared a schedule of questions for use in the interview. This was refined after the two pilot interviews, which had helped me to decide on the central topic areas for my purposes. Participants were provided with information about the interviews in advance, and were asked to complete a form relating to personal details. Before most of my initial interviews I sent participants a list of detailed questions which were likely to be covered in discussion (Appendix 3). After I had completed about two-thirds of my interviews, I changed my practice and provided participants instead with a shorter summary of the main areas (Appendix 4). This was because I thought that the full list was quite daunting, and was leading some participants to prepare detailed responses in writing, which might detract from spontaneity of discussion.

The interview topics covered three broad areas, with some initial introductory questions. In order not to impose a definition of singleness on my participants who might not see themselves this way, I asked them first to give me a brief self-description: 'things you might want someone you have just met to know about you'. This allowed me to see what features they chose as salient, and where possible to use the terminology that they had used in relation to their marital status. I followed this up by asking directly what terms

they preferred to use, offering some alternatives and asking whether there were other terms they might use.

I was interested in how participants dealt with self-presentation. My own experience of introducing myself was that I would rarely refer to being single. Asking my participants to say something about themselves by way of introduction meant I could note whether this was part of their self-description, although it was a somewhat contrived approach, particularly when I was talking to women I already knew. It did, however, frame the interview as 'serious business' where I was interested in the participant from my perspective as a researcher rather than simply as a friend. This verbal picture allowed for the possibility that any participants might have information unknown to me that they regarded as salient about themselves. It was also an opportunity to check whether they did consider themselves to be single.

The first substantive area of the interview involved interactional issues. I asked about the images participants held of singleness and how they perceived others' views of themselves. The second area focused on the participant's past and current relationships. The final questions aimed to revisit the participant's current feelings about her situation, and to elicit any political perspectives she might hold regarding the single state. While informal, it was a guided conversation with a particular purpose, and in this sense was in the tradition of ethnographic interviews (Burgess, 1984). The interviewer asks questions designed to elicit talk from the person being interviewed.

Ethical issues in the interviewing

In discourse analysis, what individual interviewees have said becomes, once transcribed, data for analysis. The focus is not on individual intentions in speech acts, or the inner state of the speaker, but on patterns in talk. What participants say is in that sense looked at for its potential as a common resource, a way of talking that any participant might have used. Some research approaches such as oral history, encourage the identification of individual people and places as part of the respect and shared ownership of the project (Drake and

Finnegan, 1994). It is usual in discourse analysis, as with most other social research, to avoid including any details that reveal the identity of speakers (Taylor, 2001).

For my research, interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were then anonymised, with names changed and details removed such as place names or friends' names which might lead to identification of the participant. Although my focus is on resources used in talk, rather than the individual speakers, I also wish to recognise participants as persons with their own narratives and personal histories upon which they draw in the interview. I was concerned that if I made up a name for them, it might convey class or age-cohort associations that were misleading, and might be disliked by the participant concerned. I asked participants to choose a pseudonym for themselves for use with their transcript, thinking that this would allow them a degree of participation, albeit minimal, as well as providing names that had more authentic associations for the person concerned.

However, three of those interviewed wanted to have their own name used: one saying that she could not imagine being called anything else. It is possible that the use of a person's own name would not identify them with certainty to others in subsequent writing and publication, particularly if the name is a common one. This was a dilemma for me: if I was offering choice, why should participants not choose their own name? This might be as effective as a pseudonym in concealing identity, given the overall convention of anonymising in the study, as any other. However, their names could have identified them to other participants and their own acquaintances, if not to the more general readership of reports. I had experienced difficulty in another project when someone objected to the use of her own name for a re-publication of an article she had written some years earlier on her mental health problems. She was by this time working in a position where people were not aware of her mental health history. After consideration of potential problems I contacted the participants to explain my concerns and that I would prefer to disguise the name. When people give permissions over their speech, its transcription or their writing they cannot always foresee how they may feel about their words being attributed to them

at some time in the future.

As with questions of anonymising participants' names, there are different and conflicting traditions in research approaches regarding participation in the research process. Oral historians see their aim as retrieval of the past experience of groups of older people and its recording (Bornat, 1994b), and may use audio recordings of their participants as well as transcripts, crediting the originator by name and seeing their work as a shared project, with 'shared authorship' (Frisch, 1990). Using another approach, 'memory work', a group of women examined their own memories as a tool for reviewing the way that their perceptions of their own sexuality and the relationship to their bodies are 'knotted into social structures and social relations between the sexes' (Haug, 1992). The group analysis of their process, which all appear to have participated in, implies a more thoroughgoing sharing of authorship and authority. Discourse analytic approaches regard data as revealing common resources and the process of analysing the nature of resources can mean a distancing of the words used from the ownership of the person who spoke them.

In my own approach to involvement in the process I wanted to provide participants with their own transcribed interviews and to give them an opportunity to correct or delete material. In part, this stemmed from the feminist orientation of my project. Participants were generous with their time, and this seemed to me one small thing that I could return to them. I was conscious of the research focus as a sensitive one, and was prepared for the possibility that participants might have qualms about their words being used for analysis and potential publication. Furthermore, interviewees own the copyright to their words under the 1988 Copyright, Designs and Patents Act and I needed their consent for quotation (Bornat, 1994a).

I viewed consent to having interviews tape-recorded and permission to quote transcribed extracts as an ongoing process. I asked permission to record and explained the anonymising process at the time of the interview. I later provided participants with a copy of the transcript of the interview and offered the opportunity to correct or delete material.

This was a risky strategy, since I would have been disconcerted had anyone asked for deletion of a passage that I had chosen to analyse in detail. Fortunately for me, the changes suggested were very few, and quite minor. I devised a consent form (Appendix 5) allowing participants to give permission for as well as place restrictions on my use of the transcript.

Other aspects of confidentiality and privacy required extra care on my part when interviewing friends and acquaintances. As well as explaining that I would not be identifying participants by name in any writing and publication on the project, I assured them that I would not be discussing what they had said in ways that revealed their identity to other people, including other interviewees. A number of my interviews were with individuals known to each other. In one case I interviewed two women who were neighbours, one immediately after the other (who had passed on the information about the project to her in the first place). They could, of course, choose whether to discuss with each other what they had said in their interviews, but it might be hard for them to trust my avowals of complete confidentiality on my part. There was a delicate path for me to tread. The interviews were in the context of my visit to one and a subsequent call on the other, and it would have been artificial to ignore this context. However, I was careful not to talk of the interviews as such or of their respective responses.

Another issue is the possibility that the participant herself may not wish to be reminded of what she said, in confidence, in an interview situation, on another more social occasion. Jennifer Platt, writing of interviewing one's peers, dealt with the possibility that a reference to an interview might be insensitive by in effect pretending the research interview had never happened. On reflection, she considered that this may not be what interviewees expect or want, as it may give the impression that their contribution is undervalued (Platt, 1981).

In relation to such concerns, I thought that I should consider the interview itself as a bounded and special kind of conversation. It did not make sense to pretend that it had

not happened: many participants are not people I have regular or frequent contact with and are likely to refer to the research or enquire after progress when we meet. I explained to participants that I would not be bringing up what they had said to me during this interview in subsequent personal conversations we had, although they were at liberty to do so. This was a risky undertaking to give, as there was a possibility that I might forget under what circumstances they had told me something about themselves, wrongly assume it was not a sensitive matter, and refer to it inadvertently. I hope I have been faithful to my intentions here.

A specific aspect of interviewing people that are already known to the interviewer is that sometimes participants are inclined to leave out key details on the assumption that they are common knowledge (Platt, 1981). My participants were no exception and they might skim over matters they knew we had discussed before, for instance in talking about their lives, or about past events. Sometimes I asked them to go over what I considered to be relevant information, so that from a narrative point of view a transcript might be more understandable to readers. On the other hand, I was aware of a risk that I might tend to think that I knew 'facts' about a participant's life that contradicted what she was telling me in the interview. I had, at times, to curb my tendency to think that I have a better memory of the past than others, and accept the version that a participant was giving to me.

However, if she asked me for my opinion, or whether I viewed her in a particular way, as occasionally happened, then I tried to answer her with candour.

Jennifer Coates describes her interviews on 'women's talk' with women she already knew as: 'strange kind of friendly conversation rather than a formal interview' (Coates, 1996, p. 11). With the exception of the group discussion with four friends, where I often found the topic took on a life of its own, my interviews did feel like interviews, albeit informal.

Particularly with those with whom I had a prior relationship it was a distinctly different kind of conversation from what preceded or succeeded it. With participants that I had not met before, the boundaries of the 'interview talk' and what preceded or followed it were of a slightly different nature, but were also clearly marked, in particular as I switched the

tape recorder on or off. While I matched some disclosures with disclosures of my own, I was conscious that I wanted to hear more of the other person's views and ideas than my own. In three of the individual interviews with friends we made some references to past conversations: in others we kept firm boundaries around the interview conversation. I took my lead from the other participant on this.

As the literature review has suggested, the topic of singleness is a sensitive one. One participant apologised because she did not feel satisfied with her responses, and referred to the 'scholarly work' I was doing, the inference being that she should also be responding at a scholarly level. She also acknowledged that she was finding the process painful. I tried to reassure her that whatever she said was of interest to me, and that there were not right or wrong answers. I also offered to stop the interview at any point she wanted, and that she could skip any aspects that she found difficult. However, such offers may be difficult to take up: once an interview is underway it has its own momentum, and having agreed to be interviewed, this participant may have felt obliged to continue. We were perhaps both influenced by our understandings of what makes for a successful interview.

Ending interviews, exiting membership

Allen (1989) routinely included a third, final interview in her research with women born in 1910, which she saw as a 'wind-down process', and found that she received many invitations to share a meal and gifts on this occasion. I felt uneasy about incorporating this into my research design. It seemed patronising to assume that participants needed help from me to recover from the interview, and I was also not sure whose interests it would be most designed to serve. I told participants in advance of our interview that I would be happy to have a follow-up discussion if they found that issues were raised that were difficult for them, or that they wanted to explore further. No one took up this offer. However, many participants indicated that they had articulated some thoughts for the first time in the process of being interviewed, and that the opportunity to think about the topic was one of their reasons for offering to participate.

Lofland writes of the 'agony of betrayal' that all fieldworkers feel once they have plumbed respondents for their deepest emotions and beliefs, then leave the field to analyse their data from a theoretical and detached framework (Lofland and Lofland, 1984). This might suggest overinvolvement, which is arguably more likely for those 'inside' the culture of study. It might be expected in my situation that any sense of betrayal would be more intense where I was interviewing friends and acquaintances. However, for me the ending of interviews with participants who I had only just met were the more difficult occasions. I noticed that I felt awkward as I came to the end of the interviews with women whom I had not met before, when there was no reason to think that we might meet again. My notes refer to the sense I wanted to make some continuing connection: 'I feel as though they've shared so much personal stuff, and it doesn't seem right to go away with all that without some future plans.' However, apart from offering a follow-up discussion I did not make arrangements for further contact, suspecting that this might be more to help me with my sense of a connection forged that should not be lightly broken than in the interests of the other participant.

Adler and Adler (1987) suggest that 'complete member researchers' have such a strong commitment and self-identification with the group that they study that they have a particularly hard time portraying them in the light of a detached analyst. They do not want to hurt them in any way through revealing their secrets and most of all, they do not want to show them that they thought of them in any way other than the way members think. Adler and Adler point out that most of this must be done if a theoretical analysis is to be written. I have certainly experienced some of these difficulties, worrying over what participants might feel about a line of analysis I have taken. The most problematic decisions have been when I have wanted to include more of an individual participant's life story. In choosing such examples I have had to find some balance between awareness of data which might be particularly rich for analytical purposes and concern for what the individual behind the transcript might feel.

So did I exit my membership of being somewhere close to a 'complete participant'? My

situation changed in the course of working on this thesis. At the time of the interviews I considered myself to be single. I was just embarking on what has proved so far to be an enduring relationship with a man. At the time of writing, I only consider myself single in the legalistic meaning of 'not married'. The exit from being a woman alone has been a rather gradual one, and the intensity of my interest in the issues faced by women alone has not waned. At times, for instance when in the company of married couples, I still draw on a 'single' identity. However, if I were doing my interviewing at this later period in my life I would probably present myself differently to other participants, as I would not be able to lay claim to quite the same common ground.

Transcription

Although I am discussing transcription following the interviews because this was the order in which processes took place, it can also be considered as part of generation of data, in this case the selection of what *counts* as data. It is important in discursive approaches to give detailed attention to what is said and how it is said: the fuller the transcript the more it is possible to capture how the interaction is a collaborative project organised around current activities (Potter, 1996a). Transcription is both a theoretical activity and a selective process (Ochs, 1979). Transcripts need to reflect the researcher's research goals. My main interest is in resources used at the level of phrases and the kind of positioning speakers achieve through such use. For the most part of this study the focus is on how meanings are jointly constructed and the words and kinds of descriptions employed rather than the detailed conversational moves. For this a fairly simple form of notation has been used and a list of transcription symbols is shown in Appendix 6.

The main features of the transcribed extracts in this thesis are that the names of speakers are listed down the side of the page with the transcribed speech laid out as in a script.

Lines have been numbered for ease of reference. The numbering is not continuous throughout an individual transcript, but restarts with each new extract. The exception is cases where a more extended length of speech has been split into smaller units for analysis. Numbering there is sequential over the larger speech unit, so that it is also

possible to see if lines have been omitted. Pauses in speech are shown but not timed.

The transcription for Chapter 7 is dealt with differently in order to identify and bring out some aspects of 'trouble' in the interaction in interviews. In this chapter I take a more conversation analytic approach, looking at the sequential aspects of the interaction, and working with the assumption that no interactional event can be dismissed as irrelevant, since even drawing breath may affect how an interaction unfolds (Wooffitt, 2001). For this an extended and more detailed version of transcription has been used so that it is possible to identify overlapping speech, interruptions or token responses and see an estimated length of pauses and gross changes of volume or emphasis (a list of symbols used in Chapter 7 is shown in Appendix 7).

In order for the joint construction of meaning to be visible I have included my own questions and responses. My contributions are shown next to my name on the side of the page and in my analysis I refer to myself as 'Jill'. Although this can seem an odd way for me to refer to my part in the interview, I have found it important in helping me to separate my voice as analyst from my voice as participant. My aim is to attend to my own role in interactions in a less defensive fashion than might otherwise be the case.

While Adler and Adler (1987), working in an ethnographic tradition, warn of the dangers of 'member-researchers' not wanting to risk taking up a line of analysis which would not accord with the participants' own interpretations, they do not consider the pitfalls of reporting on one's own participation. From a different theoretical perspective, conversation analysts such as Schegloff (1997b) (also not considering the researcher as participant in an interaction) argue that attention to the meaning-making employed by participants at the time of the interaction, and displayed in their turn-taking contributions is an essential focus. This is an argument against an 'academic and theoretical imperialism' (Schegloff, 1997b), whereby the researcher on analysing data imposes her personal preoccupations without regard to whether these concerns would be recognised by participants. Thus, there are warnings against being too enmeshed in an identity to dare to

step back and consider what is going on in an interaction, and there are warnings against being so committed to a theoretical line that every action can be taken as evidence for it. Although these appear contradictory concerns, what they have in common is both detachment and fidelity to the evidence available.

Including 'oneself' in the data to be analysed could intensify any theoretical imperialism, if the researcher claims prior knowledge of her own intentions as participant. This would bring a double opportunity, first as participant and second as analyst, to import her own preoccupations into the data. I have found referring to my own speech as interviewer in the third person to be an important first step in re-examining taken-for-granted activities and meanings as I move into the role of analyst. By this means I can examine speech turns from 'Jill' without assuming that I already know what the intentions of this speaker were. I can try to hear the turn and read it in transcription for how it might be 'hearable' or 'readable' by another.

Some researchers use initials in transcription, rather than participants' names: the initials may denote the role of the person speaking. For instance, Robin Wooffitt, in research on psychic practitioners such as mediums, in his transcription uses 'P' for psychic practitioner and 'S' for sitter (Wooffitt, 2001, p. 67). This can have advantages in focusing attention on the talk as representative of patterns in conversation rather than 'belonging' to one or two identifiable people. However, as Billig has shown, all naming decisions bring their own implications, highlighting some features while disguising others (Billig, 1999). The use of first names appears to be democratic, but there may be a power differential between one speaker and another. The use of initials appears to be gender-neutral, but gender differences may be important in the talk studied. My choice to use (anonymised) first names aims to retain a sense of persons, who while they may use a stock of common resources in patterned ways, are also individuals with personal lives and histories.

Methodical listening to the recordings of interviews is recommended as aiding later recall of the interaction that took place as well as accuracy of transcription (Psathas and

Anderson, 1990). Apart from the first two pilot interviews, which I transcribed myself, the initial transcription was done by secretaries. However, there were several rounds of checking that I went through. First, I listened to each recording again and checked the transcript for accuracy, before I sent a copy to the participant. At a later stage as I selected passages for fuller analysis, I checked again in more detail, inserting untimed pauses and numbering the lines. A further layer of listening again to recordings and re-transcribing according to a modified version of the transcription system devised by Gail Jefferson (Atkinson and Heritage, 1984b) was required for the extracts quoted in Chapter 7.

Data analysis

In any data analysis the first step is careful consideration of the data and familiarisation: listening and re-listening to recordings, reading and re-reading of transcripts to get some overall sense of what might be of interest. Discourse or conversation analysts have contrasting ideas on how to move on to the next stage. Edwards (1997) recommends 'unmotivated looking', in order to avoid reading into the data a set of analytic categories that may not work, and may leave the researcher disappointed in what has been identified. This advice comes originally from Sacks, who argues that data should not be used simply as evidence for problems that the researcher has defined prior to analysis. Instead 'The first rule is to be interested in what it is you've got' (Sacks, 1992, Volume 1, p. 471).

Wetherell and Potter (1992), in relation to their work on discursive practices and racism, describe their process involving series of codings, copying material into files according to different themes, and checking the source material again as understanding of particular themes developed. They point out that the process of arriving at a view of the social practices taking place may be very different to the way in which that conclusion is justified. Their own analysis was guided by 'the sorts of subtle knowledge that a cultural member possesses', but this was not the warrant for the veracity of their analytic conclusions (Wetherell and Potter, 1992, p. 101). Wetherell and Potter recommend searching for variability as a signal that different ways of constructing events are being deployed.

My own experience was that I needed to do some preliminary sifting in order to get a purchase on what it was I had got. I looked at a selection of manuscripts and noted major themes and topics that appeared. I copied material into large data files for the major areas of questioning. Passages were often replicated in more than one file as they might relate to different areas. I looked at the data files initially for specific aspects: for instance I mapped where I could detect different meanings being attached to singleness in the 'images' data file, and noted strongly contrasting meanings involving stigma and independence. The approach has been somewhat different for each data file. In general it has involved movement from looking in detail at the data selected from one individual participant, back to checking across the corpus in the rest of the file for whether patterns identified are to be found elsewhere. What I searched for was some of the taken-for-granted ways of talking about singleness that were present in our talk, and areas of contradiction and variability in these. I looked for puzzles, for instance where a particular response might not be the anticipated one.

Detecting regularities and patterns in participants' talk in relation to topic areas has been a slow process and has involved discussion of tentative hypotheses with my supervisors and other colleagues. In order to develop my analysis I went through several rounds of looking for patterns for each area of questioning, then in extracts where I thought the pattern was evident analysing it at a more micro-analytic level. The patterns came from my data, and were not predetermined hypotheses with which I approached the data. However, any pattern I initially identified was not necessarily the one I always ended up with as a 'finding'. A focus on one kind of pattern sometimes revealed additional interesting features when I analysed the pattern more closely. I discuss particular process issues in more detail in the ensuing data chapters, as they relate to the particular analytical concepts used.

Analytical concepts

Although my approach overall is within a discursive framework, I have used different

kinds of analytic tools in each chapter, which allow me to look at different levels in the data, and work effectively with methods appropriate to the research questions addressed in these chapters. These analytic concepts come from different but related theoretical backgrounds. They work compatibly with each other although not designed for use together. Each analytic tool offers a different approach to the data, bringing a new set of insights.

The first three concepts to introduce here are explained more fully and applied in Chapter 4. *Interpretative repertoires* are frequently used sets of terms that describe and evaluate actions or events (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). They are recognisable just because they are so familiar, so much the kind of knowledge that 'everybody knows' and takes for granted. The notion of *ideological dilemmas* (Billig et al., 1988) recognises that people draw on a wide range of values and value systems in their everyday conversation. We work with beliefs, aspirations and expectations that are often in conflict with each other, and struggle to reconcile these contradictory sets of ideas. *Subject positions* (Davies and Harré, 1990) are different possible identities that come into play as people work rhetorically to present themselves in sometimes contrasting ways according to the exigencies of the conversational context. These three concepts, although each stemming from different traditions, are coming to be seen as central to critical discursive psychology and there is a developing literature which works with all three concepts together as a package (Wetherell, 1998; Edley, 2001).

The next significant tool that I use is to consider the use of *narrative*, in particular self-narrative (Gergen, 1994b), by participants in the interview context. Narrative studies form a very broad and disparate field, and while I draw on insights from different contributions to this field, the approach I use is to focus on the discursive work achieved through narrative. My perspective recognises narratives as deeply connected with the person's sense of self. I aim to look at how individuals deal with potential trouble attached to their category and to identify how they use narrative to perform an identity. I explain my use of narrative, and the theoretical traditions that I draw on, in more detail in Chapters 5 and 6.

The final set of tools in my kit, which I discuss more fully in Chapter 7, comes from the work of conversation analysts and in particular the interests of Erving Goffman and Harvey Sacks. In the context of exploring how conversational practices in the interviews are accomplished, one aspect that has helped me has been the conversation analytical focus on the *sequential aspects* of conversation (Heritage, 2001). Talk proceeds by turn, in taking a turn a speaker projects an array of possible responses by subsequent speakers, and speakers show their understanding of the expectations of prior speakers through their own next response. Another tool developed by Sacks is the *membership categorisation device* (Sacks, 1992). People use categories to store knowledge about how things work in society and assign identities to themselves or others. Each identity can be seen as one category from a set that is implied by the invocation of the identity: for instance husband/wife or father/mother/child.

The empirical chapters

The chief analytic concepts that I have used for my first empirical chapter (Chapter 4) are interpretative repertoires, subject positions and ideological dilemmas. The aim was to map the interpretative resources that participants used to make sense of their lives. This chapter explores the discursive climate for single women, and looks at how participants drew on easily recognisable, indeed canonical, versions of what singleness can mean. I wanted to find out not just what ideas my participants had about singleness, but how they interpreted or resisted common images in their personal lives. The chapter goes on to note some of the patterned ways in which participants do rhetorical work to deal with 'trouble' in the polarised resources for talking about singleness.

In the following chapters (Chapters 5 and 6) I have taken a different slant on the data, looking here at how participants drew on different narrative forms and frames to talk about their relationship history. Narrative analysis is an important resource for these two chapters. The perspective I have taken is of narrative analysis as a form of discourse analysis, so I have continued to make use of analytic concepts used in Chapter 4 as well as

reflecting on some broader themes presented in different approaches to analysing narratives. Chapter 5 focuses on just one narrative, and considers some of the trouble for a single woman in presenting herself as a relational person. Then in Chapter 6 I return to the sample as whole and consider trouble for single women in presenting themselves as possessing agency and having made choices. In the fourth empirical chapter (Chapter 7) I use a micro-analytical approach drawing on conversation analysis, and membership categories, looking at trouble in interaction within the interviews.

Conclusion

The approach that I have used in this thesis follows an emerging tradition of critical discursive psychology, a variant of discourse analysis that aims to blend the 'top down' methods of a Foucauldian analysis with the more 'bottom up' approach of examining situated and local work by participants in interviews. I have explained my decisions in relation to how to collect my data, my reasons for using mainly individual interviews with one group discussion, and discussed how I set these up and conducted them.

CHAPTER 4

Working with a 'single' identity

And it's O dear me, how would it be,
If I die an old maid in a garret
(Montgomerie, 1948)

Introduction

This chapter¹ explores the ways in which women on their own work with the typical constructions of their identity available in the public arena. Using data from my interviews I examine the identities that women construct for themselves through their talk. The main analytic tools that I use in this chapter are those of interpretative repertoires, ideological dilemmas and subject positions and I explain my use of these in the next section. Two research questions are central to this chapter. How do women on their own respond to and work with the typical constructions of their status available in the public arena? How do those typical constructions constrain and influence the ways in which women manage a 'single' identity? To anticipate my conclusions, I found that my participants drew on highly polarised constructions of singleness as a state that was both deeply problematic and at the same time full of rewards and potential. This had an important impact on the kind of identity work that they did to ward off the unacceptable face of singleness, and to deal with the apparent contradictions in their expressions of desire for intimacy.

Analytic concepts

Three linked concepts, relevant to the study of discourse, have been very helpful tools for exploring the identity work of participants in this study.

Interpretative repertoires

The interpretative repertoire is defined by Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell as a

¹ Much of the data and discussion in this chapter have appeared in the publication Reynolds, J. and Wetherell, M. (2003) 'The discursive climate of singleness: the consequences for women's negotiation of a single identity', *Feminism & Psychology*, 13 (4): 489–510.

lexicon of terms and metaphors drawn upon for characterising and evaluating actions and events (Potter and Wetherell, 1987, p. 138). Interpretative repertoires are systematically related sets of terms (Potter, 1996b). They can be recognised in the familiar and well-worn images that 'everybody' knows and understands through shared cultural membership.

Edley (2001) compares them to books on the shelves of a public library that are permanently available for borrowing, making the point that when people talk or think they invariably use terms already provided by history. Conversations can, of course, be original, but they are usually made up of a patchwork of 'quotations' from various interpretative repertoires (Edley, 2001, p. 198).

An example of an interpretative repertoire that was frequently drawn on by my participants is the notion that 'times are changing and things are getting better for women on their own'. For instance, the following comments came from three different interviews: 'the attitude certainly has changed and it has to be said that I'm asked less now whether I'm married', 'women on their own were to be pitied, they'd failed in some way; I don't think that applies now, or least it's not supposed to be, that's not politically correct', and 'I think that it's changing now; I think it's easier to be single and feel good about it.' The golden future is being conjured up here: things are so much better now and more progressive, so that the 'bad things' – images of spinsters and old maids – are all located in the past, in the bad old days.

What is being offered in these constructions is commonsensical: both participants in the interview are aware of the associations being made, within the context of the conversation. So a repertoire could appear as fragments or be alluded to in passing with the listener being able to supply the whole broader chain of association without elaboration being necessary (Wetherell, 1998). Repertoires are customised in order to answer a question, for instance as an anecdote about the participant's childhood, or customised as a story about what other people might say to the single woman.

The use of interpretative repertoires as a tool for analysis is primarily as a way of understanding the content of discourse and how that content is organised: a focus on

language use rather than concern with linguistic analysis as such (Wetherell and Potter, 1992). Researchers have an interest in how people use various repertoires towards a certain function, and how they move in and out of them while constructing their accounts (Nikander, 1995).

The four interpretative repertoires that I discuss in this chapter, because my participants drew them on with regularity, are different characterisations of singleness:

- singleness as deficit
- singleness as social exclusion
- singleness as independence and choice
- singleness as self-development and achievement.

I discuss these repertoires in more detail under the heading below, 'Interpretative repertoires of singleness'.

Ideological dilemmas

The ideology referred to here is 'lived' ideology (Billig *et al.*, 1988). In contrast with Marxist notions of ideologies that form coherent and consistent chains of ideas that serve the interests of the ruling class in maintaining their domination, lived ideologies are composed of the beliefs, values and practices of a given society or culture. They are far from being coherent and integrated, instead they are characterised by inconsistency, fragmentation and contradiction (Edley, 2001). The competing arguments and values which people draw on in making sense of their lives pose many dilemmas. People solve various kinds of everyday ideological dilemmas in their talk and use rhetoric to do it. Interpretative repertoires and ideological dilemmas are thus closely linked as speakers work with the inconsistency in the repertoires on which they draw and try to reconcile contradictory argumentative threads. I shall be discussing the ideological dilemmas that emerged for participants in this study as they drew on competing repertoires of singleness as a problematic state and singleness as a highly idealised and positive state.

Subject positions

These are the different identities that are made available and relevant by different ways of talking (Edley, 2001). The perspective on identity is that rather than being a fixed and immutable property of an individual, different identities are made available to a person through discursive practices and conjured up in conversational interactions (Davies and Harré, 1990). There is a connection here with the kind of subjects that Foucault argues 'personify' the discourse. I noted in the Introduction some familiar ones that are often applied to single women, such as 'the lonely spinster', the 'dangerous divorcée'. While these are rather crude stereotypes, which we might not expect single women to import wholesale into their conversation as positions for themselves, they nevertheless may emerge as subjects against which women position themselves in contrast. In other words, single women may demonstrate in their conversational moves that they are neither lonely spinsters nor dangerous divorcées.

In relation to conversational moves that produce contrasting subject positions, I make use in my analysis of the notion that subject positions can be 'troubled' (Wetherell, 1998; Wetherell and Edley, 1998). Wetherell and Edley use the idea of trouble in relation to identity in two different ways (Taylor, 2004). One meaning is that of a negatively valued identity, as when a young man talking of his sexual successes is positioned by another as 'on the moral low ground' (Wetherell, 1998, pp. 397–398). The other meaning relates to troubled identity work, when a speaker is inconsistent or implausible with regard to their identity (Taylor, 2004). Speakers can be seen to do repair work in their conversation in order to explain inconsistencies:

People are accountable to each other in interaction and thus departures from 'what everybody knows to be appropriate' require explanation and create 'trouble' in the interaction which will need repair.

(Wetherell and Edley, 1998, p. 161)

I draw on both of these meanings of trouble in my analysis.

Analytic process

I worked with a corpus or data file derived from all the material produced in response to my request for self-description and for images of singleness that the speaker held or

thought other people to hold. The extracts that I selected were quite lengthy. I looked first for patterns and regularities in participants' talk in general about singleness, and then for the identity management relating to these. The search for patterns was guided by the three analytic concepts discussed above.

Interpretative repertoires of singleness

Although participants referred to multi-faceted and contradictory images of singleness, there are some marked regularities in the repertoires which they drew on. The first two repertoires that I discuss here are strongly denigrated and the second two strongly idealised. These highly polarised repertoires present single women with a problematic ideological package, which has challenging consequences for their personal identity work. I review the four major repertoires and some of the subject positions entailed in their presentation.

Singleness as personal deficit

This repertoire emerged through descriptions of single women encountered when the participant was a child, impressions formed in early life, or in imagining the views of others.

Extract 1

- | | | |
|----|--------|--|
| 1 | Jill | [...] I'm wondering if you have any |
| 2 | | particular images about single women that |
| 3 | | (.) sort of going back, if you can |
| 4 | | remember, to what you might have thought |
| 5 | | as a child or a teenager or as a young |
| 6 | | woman, coming up to the present really. |
| 7 | | What it might have meant to you at |
| 8 | | different times? |
| 9 | Rachel | Mm, mm. Well I think growing up as a |
| 10 | | child, and as a teenager and as a young |
| 11 | | woman, um, I think the image that I had of |
| 12 | | single women was of women who were not |
| 13 | | able to have a relationship or not able to |
| 14 | | find a relationship or find a man. [...] |

Extract 2

- | | | |
|---|------|---|
| 1 | Jill | [...] I am interested in whether you've got |
| 2 | | any kind of memories of your images of |
| 3 | | singleness over time, what you might have |
| 4 | | thought as a child or a young woman |

5 growing up or at the point when you became
 6 divorced and, perhaps how you see it now.
 7 Jay I think my images when I was growing up
 8 were largely negative ones. Erm I've been
 9 trying to remember whether I had any
 10 spinster, maiden aunts or relatives in the
 11 family and I don't think I had any. I
 12 don't, so my images would have been the
 13 ones that have sort of filtered down
 14 through family perceptions and through
 15 obviously through the media and erm ones
 16 that come packaged for you rather than any
 17 direct experience, but certainly, or
 18 through literature I suppose, things like
 19 Jane Eyre and you know them, erm the sort
 20 of Victorian image of the spinster in the
 21 family who had to be supported somehow by
 22 the men in the family and who was erm, not
 23 quite a whole person in some way. So I
 24 suppose I grew up with those images, erm,
 25 and with an expectation that it wasn't me,
 26 it wasn't going to be me, I was
 27 heterosexual I was erm at some stage going
 28 to get married and have children which I
 29 duly did.

The notion of singleness as signalling a particular kind of personal deficit is drawn on in Extract 1 and by many other participants as the 'canonical view', in other words as part of the familiar and well understood stories of one's culture. In the personal deficit repertoire the focus is on the *personal characteristics* of the single woman, and a strong link is made between these characteristics and membership of the category. The characteristics of a woman who has failed to get a man and is in need of this missing support.

The single woman constructed here is pitiable and problematic as a character. She is one of the 'subjects' who personify the discourse in Foucault's terms, but this is not generally a subject position in the sense of one brought out in conversational moves that participants in my study take up and occupy for themselves. Phrases such as 'not chosen', 'not wanted', or 'on the shelf' dominated participants' accounts. As in both these extracts, participants were not necessarily referring to specific women they had known, but might bring out a composite picture of singleness and spinsterhood. Referring to her unmarried teachers in school, one person said 'there was this kind of stereotype that women who weren't married were less human'. It was also not unusual for participants to refer to having not anticipated a single life for themselves as a child, as in Extract 2.

The interpretative repertoire of singleness as personal deficit, as I shall demonstrate later in this chapter, powerfully shaped the management of participants' identities.

Singleness as social exclusion

An alternative, but still quite negative, repertoire involved a construction of singleness as social exclusion rather than personal deficit. Typically, this repertoire emerged in anecdotes and stories about other people's reactions to oneself involving reported speech and accounts of internal dialogue in response. It was developed most strongly in relation to questions about other people's images of singleness, and was presented through accounts of actual experiences rather than as the familiar story of culture, and was therefore more firmly 'owned'.

Extract 3

1	Lyn	[...] And I think that you don't get locked
2		into a sort of social network if you're
3		single, or I haven't, it hasn't been my
4		experience, and when I was in my 30s a
5		single friend said to me 'oh well couples
6		won't invite us because they're scared of
7		us; they think we're going to walk off
8		with their men' and I don't think of it
9		the same way now but I think there are,
10		there are, there is this sort of couple
11		network thing and they'll invite each
12		other round to dinner and you'll sort of
13		share it and swap it and make it equal and
14		as a single person I have never felt
15		included in that. [...]

Extract 4

1	Josie	[...] Well it's because I've been on my own
2		such a long time that, um, I remember
3		going to a birthday party a few months
4		ago, in a pub, and when I got there the
5		people were couples. The first people
6		that arrived were couples, and I launched
7		straight into this business about not
8		being in a couple myself and how I felt
9		odd and I clocked to myself, 'My goodness
10		me you're being very kind of up-front
11		about this'. And it's because, yes, I do,
12		in all honesty, sometimes I do feel
13		vulnerable, and sometimes even jealous.
14		For example my sister and her husband, and
15		my other sister and her husband, take my
16		mother on holiday; so they go off in these

17 sort of two blissful couples to take my
 18 mother on holiday, you know? I sometimes
 19 think that couples favour other couples
 20 and it can make you feel left out and odd
 21 [...]

In Extract 3, Lyn is responding to a question about what she finds it easy or difficult to do as a woman on her own. Josie, in Extract 4, is responding to a question about whether and how she lets people know that she is single.

The repertoire of social exclusion constructs a strong contrast between singleness and coupledness. Repeatedly women talked, as in Extract 3, of a different kind of social existence that they understand couples to have, dinner parties, return invitations, and regular connections with others. In contrast, they spoke of their own experience of not being contacted by others and having to work hard to initiate all social activities themselves. The implication in this repertoire is that the single woman is excluded from social events and coupledness as an ideal. The presentation is of singleness and coupledness as in effect two quite divergent, almost unconnected, social worlds or social spaces. In general, this sense of strong binary, a separated geography of two unrelated states, is a commonplace feature of the broader discourse of singleness. In this repertoire, typically, one of these spaces is constructed as privileged, and the other, singleness, as excluded, lacking and disadvantaged. In Extract 5, the sense of exclusion is such that it is described as difficult even to talk about being single.

Extract 5

1 Marion [...] And also erm, you know, people don't
 2 actually sort of talk about being single.
 3 They always talk about the relationships
 4 they're in, and therefore you're, even if
 5 you the one you've got is not terribly
 6 wonderful or whatever, you are inclined to
 7 sort of talk about it, and erm and also
 8 even if you are not in a relationship at
 9 all at the time it's always about what I
 10 would like it to be or I was, rather than,
 11 a poor pathetic creature really. (laughs)
 12 [...]

The prevalent notion that relationships are the most important thing in life, and a sense of struggle with this was repeated by others in my sample. As one commented: 'if that isn't

the main business of your life it's very difficult, because you feel "well it ought to be the main business". A further common feature of this repertoire was for participants to talk of close friendships that ended when the friend found a partner, as in Extract 6.

Extract 6

1	Josie	I had three friends and they all had their
2		own homes and their own jobs, you know and
3		cars. They had everything except a
4		partner. They all wanted partners really
5		badly and they found them and in all three
6		cases the friendship finished after they
7		found partners. So I was no longer
8		required, you know? I was no longer, you
9		know, part of their social scene, you
10		know?

In employing this repertoire the emphasis is placed by participants on singleness being seen by others as an odd and not normal condition, with an impact that means that one cannot find positive ways of talking about one's status. The subject positions constructed in these extracts vary. The impotence derived from the overall construction of exclusion is mitigated in Extract 3 (lines 5 to 8) by the construction of an alternative source of power – the power of the single woman to take other women's men, and thus to be seen as a threat. Josie, in Extract 4, positions herself as direct and up-front (lines 9 to 11), but also as left out and ignored (lines 18 to 20). The speaker in Extract 5 is constructed as 'passing' in a world of relationships. She talks of using an unsatisfactory relationship, or talk of the relationship she would like, as her contribution to conversational exchanges (lines 6 to 10), rather than presenting herself as someone not involved in a relationship and therefore, as she suggests with irony, 'a poor pathetic creature' (line 11). The speaker in Extract 6 positions herself as 'dumped' by her newly partnered friends (lines 7 to 10).

There is some continuity in the repertoire of social exclusion with earlier debates about 'surplus women' and the notion that the extra, non-marrying and perhaps unmarriageable woman represents a problem. These first two repertoires of deficit and social exclusion are closely connected. A person talking of social exclusion describes her own engagement with combating or living with stereotypes and assumptions prevalent in the repertoire of personal deficit.

Singleness as independence and choice

In contrast to the first two repertoires this and the next repertoire present singleness as a highly positive condition. Singleness is idealised.

Extract 7

- | | | |
|----|-------|--|
| 1 | Jill | Are there other things you could pick out |
| 2 | | that you enjoy or the things that you find |
| 3 | | difficult? |
| 4 | Annie | Um well it's silly little things really. I |
| 5 | | suppose like being able to decorate the |
| 6 | | house exactly as you like there's no |
| 7 | | compromise in anything, you can do |
| 8 | | anything you want. I mean people can moan |
| 9 | | and say that's stupid and say well there's |
| 10 | | not a lot I wanted, you know, whereas when |
| 11 | | I was married you are forever sort of um |
| 12 | | toning down what you like, or what you |
| 13 | | want. I know that's a very selfish |
| 14 | | attitude but I do enjoy being able to have |
| 15 | | exactly my own way. Bad things, I don't |
| 16 | | think there's anything particularly bad |
| 17 | | about it, it's hard put to find any down |
| 18 | | side you know. |

Extract 8

- | | | |
|---|-------|--|
| 1 | Susie | [...] And I think I'm really fortunate I |
| 2 | | don't have to put up with all the negative |
| 3 | | things about relationships and I think, I |
| 4 | | think overall they're quite difficult |
| 5 | | things; I don't think they're sort of |
| 6 | | romantic, sharing of the burden things at |
| 7 | | all. I think they are an additional burden |
| 8 | | and I think most of the time I'm grateful |
| 9 | | not to have to carry it. [...] |

This repertoire of choice and independence constructs singleness as a positive decision, with stories and anecdotes celebrating one's independence. Participants regularly pointed to the freedom they had to make decisions in the way they wanted to, without needing to take others into account, not having to compromise, not having to clear up someone else's mess, not having to ask permission. The force of this repertoire depends a good deal on drawing out contrasts with remembered or assumed lack of freedom and choice for women who are married or in a marriage like relationship. The two states of singleness and coupledness become differently marked. Now it is singleness that is the privileged and

celebrated space. Women position themselves as 'grateful' to belong to this free space of independence and choice. Indeed, as in Extract 7 (lines 13 to 14), privilege has to be carefully managed, to acknowledge the possible negative consequences that those who occupy privileged spaces might be held to account as 'selfish'.

Singleness as self-development and achievement

The final pattern that I wish to draw attention to in the data can be described as a repertoire of self-development and achievement. It is more diverse than the repertoires described above: four extracts give a flavour of the range. The first extract that illustrates this repertoire, is drawn from a group discussion.

Extract 9

- | | | |
|---|----------|---|
| 1 | Jennifer | I think also we have more time to think |
| 2 | | than other people, to do what we want and |
| 3 | | therefore we don't, we can actually take |
| 4 | | time off to get off the wheel, and so we |
| 5 | | have time to think about what we want to |
| 6 | | do and therefore we can develop ourselves |
| 7 | | more, maybe, sometimes. |
| 8 | Jane | We're like free spirits, we're not boxed |
| 9 | | into some little cage. |

The suggestion is that women on their own have the time to develop themselves. In Extract 10, Val is talking of a time when she was adapting to a new job abroad.

Extract 10

- | | | |
|----|-----|--|
| 1 | Val | I can remember thinking a lot of that time |
| 2 | | when it was difficult 'I'm really pleased |
| 3 | | I'm doing this on my own' because the |
| 4 | | whole equation about (.) because like I |
| 5 | | say I had this conversation with myself |
| 6 | | and this voice said, 'well just go home |
| 7 | | you don't have to stay here, you can go |
| 8 | | home now'; and this other voice would say, |
| 9 | | 'no, no'. So I really had to work out what |
| 10 | | was really important for me; absolutely |
| 11 | | for me and the terms on which I was there |
| 12 | | and at which point I would decide to give |
| 13 | | up and what difficulties I would decide |
| 14 | | were worth sticking with and overcoming |
| 15 | | and it was totally on my terms and if I'd |
| 16 | | had to take someone else into account, and |
| 17 | | weigh it all up with them and take their |
| 18 | | feelings into account as well, I don't |
| 19 | | think I could have done it. Well I know I |
| 20 | | couldn't. [...] |

As with the repertoire of choice and independence, freedom to make decisions without having to think about a partner is emphasised. There is a construction of challenge, and work on one's self in response to that challenge. Val constructs herself as achieving through adversity.

Extract 11

1	Claire	[...] I'm pleased to be the age I'm at. I'm
2		not sure, could I think how I think now at
3		the age of 25? Could my life have been
4		different? One of my pleasures since I've
5		been single, I've gradually become more
6		open myself to being more interested in
7		lots of different things. Does one become
8		more like that, more closed and rigid in a
9		partnership that's not fulfilling? [...]

Claire, at mid-life, celebrates the way her life has unfolded and her sense that she has been more open to a range of interests since she became single.

Extract 12

1	Milly	[...] there are so many more professional
2		women who don't want to put their careers
3		aside while they have children and
4		marriage is largely about having children,
5		still, and so many women are choosing not
6		only not to have children but not to get
7		married, and so they are single because
8		they are career types and that to me is a
9		positive image. [...]

Milly, in her early 30s, relishes the subject position of the 'career women'. This repertoire of self-development is also a repertoire of female ambition, formulated within both liberal feminist and humanistic psychological terms. There are close links with the previous repertoire. Singleness as self-actualisation and achievement also gains force from contrast with marriage. Financial independence is a goal as well as other more diffuse aims of self-fulfilment, all of which may have been hard won. The notion is that there is so much more to life than getting married or looking after other people, and that without these distractions there is more opportunity to achieve desired goals. There are also traces of female solidarity in Extract 9: a positive feminist politics of singleness.

The repertoires in combination

These four interpretative repertoires are the prevalent patterns of sense-making that were present in my data in relation to the interview questions about images of singleness. They constitute a large part of the discursive terrain of singleness for participants. Most women drew on all four repertoires; a few drew only on the second two, none drew solely on the first two. These repertoires in part constrain or enable the kinds of conversations, dialogues and internal monologues that are possible around singleness. They offer certain ways of talking for single women. They form rhetorical point and counter-point and provide a discursive package creating a powerful set of ideological dilemmas without easy resolution. The idealised third and fourth repertoires of independence and self-development, for example, can be a response and contrast to the first and second repertoires of personal deficit and social exclusion. The positive repertoires of choice and self-development were often undermined and shadowed by the first and second repertoires of deficit and exclusion. The subject positions offered to women across the repertoires vary widely from 'strong and independent' to 'pitiable and problematic' and from 'fulfilled' to 'attacked and excluded'.

As I have noted, the repertoires are highly polarised – two are strongly denigrated and two strongly idealised. The general impression is that single women are working out their identity in a context of a highly dilemmatic construction of singleness. Billig and colleagues (1988) have drawn attention to the dilemmatic nature of many core ideological values, but there are particular challenges in inhabiting a social category with such polarised attributes. What are the consequences of this dilemmatic construction of singleness for the single woman's identity work?

It may be unusual to have to draw on a discursive and ideological space that is so polarised, where the ideological dilemmas raised by the contradictions between the repertoires are so closely linked to the possibilities for who one can be as a person. There are some contrasts with the repertoires drawn on by men and the positioning work they employ in relation to hegemonic masculinity. Rather than warding off implications of personal deficit, men are

often negotiating their position in relation to something strongly valued. For instance, Wetherell and Edley show examples from their data of men keeping self-exaltation in check through modesty work and self-deprecation (Wetherell and Edley, 1999).

Perhaps membership of other more marginalised social categories based on ethnicity, class, sexuality, older age and disability is more likely to involve managing both denigrated and idealised categorisations simultaneously. The development of some social conscientisation over recent decades as well as new social movements that aim to counter denigration (Habermas, 1981) may have given the members of these groups some new resources for their identity work. Single women, however, lack a feminist social movement or identity politics specifically related to singleness. There is an absence of any co-ordinated and collective efforts to deal with denigration for women alone. Possibly, without this, it is more difficult to unequivocally inhabit the positive, and distance oneself from the denigrated constructions.

As might be expected, the ways that participants dealt with the impact of these repertoires on their personal identity were more varied than the repertoires themselves. However, there were some regularities. In the remainder of my analysis I will focus first on two pervasive negative ways in which this pattern of repertoires seemed to shape the identity work of the women in my sample. From a feminist perspective, these modes of management suggest the need for a more positive and elaborated politics of singleness. I will then consider some examples of a more reflexive approach adopted by some participants, where they worked with the contradictions of the different repertoires to come up with a more integrated self-positioning.

Constructing the self as not a typical member

Rather than use the term 'single' and fully inhabit the category, participants often distanced themselves from the denigrated construction of singleness, and from the category of singleness defined in negative ways. There was delicate footwork over the ways in which one 'belongs' to the category and indeed how the category is defined in the first place. Consider Extract 13 below in which Val argues that although she belongs to the

category 'woman living on her own' she does not fit within the category 'single', since she has a boyfriend.

Extract 13

- | | | |
|----|------|--|
| 1 | Jill | Mm, yeah, absolutely fine. I think when we |
| 2 | | spoke on the phone you didn't tend to |
| 3 | | think of yourself as single and I didn't |
| 4 | | hear you say that just then; just that |
| 5 | | you're quite happy living on your own. |
| 6 | Val | Yes; I suppose when we were talking on the |
| 7 | | phone I, um, I think what I said was 'I |
| 8 | | think of myself firstly as financially |
| 9 | | independent'. I don't think of myself as a |
| 10 | | loner, as alone at all. I do have a |
| 11 | | boyfriend, um, I don't think of him as a |
| 12 | | partner, probably 'cos we don't live |
| 13 | | together and our lives don't join up so |
| 14 | | much that I have to take him into account |
| 15 | | an awful lot. I've rarely not had a |
| 16 | | boyfriend actually. In fact sometimes they |
| 17 | | overlap, which can be difficult. So I've |
| 18 | | never been short of a boyfriend and always |
| 19 | | had, um, plenty of friends and two or |
| 20 | | three close friends, women friends. So |
| 21 | | 'single' sounds awfully alone and I don't |
| 22 | | think of myself as being alone, except |
| 23 | | when I come back to this house I suppose, |
| 24 | | but then again, yes, I think the first |
| 25 | | thing is financial independence. I choose |
| 26 | | how to spend my money and it's not really |
| 27 | | a big issue until I see how other people |
| 28 | | don't have that. I just take it for |
| 29 | | granted. |

Val draws strongly here on the personal deficit repertoire in constructing her reading of the category 'single'. 'Single' becomes constructed as a noxious identity. There is a lot of positioning work going on in this response. Val positions herself as

- financially independent
- not a loner or alone
- having a boyfriend who she does not live with
- rarely short of a boyfriend
- having plenty of friends.

This is a lot of discursive work in response to Jill's suggestion that Val had previously said

she did not think of herself as single. Val constructs herself as not single as in 'loner', but single as in 'financially independent'. Why does Val put so much into positioning herself in this way? She is doing this work without having been offered any negative meanings of singleness. She none the less anticipates and side-steps such meanings by portraying herself as financially independent, attractive to men and socially active. It is instructive to witness the kind of work which becomes necessary to manage the disavowal of membership in a troubled (c.f. Wetherell, 1998) category membership.

Could women avoid these problems altogether by defining the category 'single' entirely through the positive and idealised repertoires of choice and independence and self-development and achievement? It might not then be necessary to distance oneself from the category. Very few of the women interviewed followed this discursive strategy. The power of the repertoire of singleness as personal deficit seems to be such that it is always 'around' as a potential reading of one's character. Its availability, and possible applicability to oneself, needs to be addressed in some way, and warded off. Women developed several ways of doing this. The next two extracts from Polly exemplify three common strategies. First, Polly finds another category outside 'single' that can hold the negative meanings of personal deficit, leaving 'single' to hold more positive connotations. Second, she reviews her own credentials to show why she does not herself qualify in the more negative personal deficit interpretation of the category. Finally, she contrasts herself positively with someone who does seem to have all the negative attributes.

Extract 14

- | | | |
|----|-------|--|
| 1 | Jill | Is it [single] a word that you would apply |
| 2 | | to yourself generally and are there any |
| 3 | | others that you might use instead? |
| 4 | Polly | No, I do say I'm single. I dislike |
| 5 | | intensely the word 'spinster'. I mean |
| 6 | | bachelor does not have a sinister, |
| 7 | | pathetic or even unpleasant ring to it, |
| 8 | | but spinster does have a very unpleasant |
| 9 | | ring to it. Um, I would say from choice I |
| 10 | | would like to have been married. Um, but |
| 11 | | I'm not married and as I said I was |
| 12 | | engaged three times; I had three options |
| 13 | | of marriage, maybe that's a clearer |
| 14 | | picture of myself; I had three options of |

15 marriage and it was me that turned down
 16 the engagements because I didn't love
 17 enough, um, and I suppose I've always
 18 looked for the ultimate love and maybe
 19 that doesn't exist.

Polly does place herself within the category, but also tries to account for herself as a single person, rather than limiting her response to agreement that she would call herself single. She differentiates single from 'spinster' and contrasts the connotations of 'sinister' and 'pathetic' that it carries with 'bachelor'. Turning down three options of marriage is highlighted by her, and this is repeated in different ways three times. She constructs a picture of herself as having had a chance to become a non-member of the category 'single' by getting married, and therefore as someone to whom attributions of personal deficit are not relevant. In Extract 15 she does further work to distinguish herself from someone whom she thinks does fit the category 'spinster'.

Extract 15

1	Polly	I think I've only got one friend that is a
2		spinster, as I am and I do think she is a
3		spinster with her trundle basket and I'm
4		afraid to say I was going to say her cat
5		as well, and she does fall into what I
6		feel is that spinster category; 'cos I
7		mean she's still in the same job I met her
8		in 30 years ago and she hasn't moved on.
9		She'll be there until retirement and she
10		hasn't moved on whereas, as I say, most of
11		my collection of friends are actors,
12		drunks, or Jewish, or Irish funnily
13		enough. I mean I have a sort of, I
14		suppose, an eccentric selection of
15		friends; I don't think any of my friends
16		would be categorised as the norm; and I've
17		got a lot of gay friends.

Here, while she includes herself in the category 'spinster', she is making a distinction between herself and the friend who 'does fall into what I feel is that spinster category'. Fitting the category is thus made more salient than the technical description which would include Polly herself. Marks of the 'typical spinster' include the trundle basket and the cat. Why does Polly apologise for being about to add 'cat' to the stereotypical image of the spinster with her trundle basket? She has a cat herself; by catching herself in an allusion to a 'spinster with cat' and reinforcing a stereotype, Polly is both adding to the picture of her

friend as a typical spinster, yet still claiming that she is not herself typical. Polly then refers to the majority of her friends – eccentrics, not the norm (lines 14 to 16) – which has the effect of further distancing her from the category of spinster. Polly says that her friend 'hasn't moved on' (lines 9 to 10) and appears to contrast her other friends with this person by her use of 'whereas' (line 10). Yet this is a non sequitur, unless it is considered that actors, drunks and so on have by definition 'moved on'. The contrast to be made is more with Polly herself. By implication, in having friends who are unusual, Polly herself becomes unusual, and less like a spinster.

The last example of distancing oneself from the negative category initially presented a puzzle:

Extract 16

- | | | |
|---|------|---|
| 1 | Jill | Well, that's very good, thank you very |
| 2 | | much, that gives me a very helpful |
| 3 | | introduction |
| 4 | Mary | I've got lots of friends, lots of friends |
| 5 | | and supportive relatives, so my social |
| 6 | | life is good. |

This sequence comes after Mary has given a brief description of herself. Why does Mary go on to comment on her friends at this point? It appears as an afterthought to her introductory account of herself, in which she mentioned her divorce, another long-term relationship and discusses in more detail her career as a nurse. It is not a response to any question. It may be a response to the interviewer's comment that she has been given 'a very helpful introduction' – a conversational act that attempts to close off what has been said so far, preparatory to further exploration. If so, we can read Mary's response as an effort to fill out the portrait that she has given of herself, finding that it is incomplete in some important way. But there is a defensive quality to this interjection, as though she is warding off some unspoken accusation with this rhetorical work. The unspoken accusation, I suggest, arises from the negative repertoires of singleness. Single women in effect always stand accused. By her assertion 'my social life is good', Mary is positioning herself positively and countering association with the repertoires of deficit and social exclusion.

These are some examples of the ways in which participants claimed that they were not typical members of the category 'single'. Approaches to doing this varied, but the overall effect was the same: to distance the speaker from the negative connotations. There are affinities in this kind of positioning work with how speakers resist membership of other potentially relevant categories, for instance, the work of Widdicombe and Wooffitt in relation to youth subcultures (Widdicombe, 1993; Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 1995; Widdicombe, 1998). The authors show (1995) how their young respondents, selected for their unusual appearance, avoided ascription to a category such as goth or punk. When asked to describe themselves they might respond as though unclear what they were being asked, or equivocate in other ways. If they later acknowledged their membership of a specific subculture, this was often as merely one dimension of their identity, not the overriding one. Widdicombe and Wooffitt suggest that the respondents were resisting a way of being seen, and countering assumptions (no doubt routinely experienced) that it is possible to know just by looking at them what sort of person they are (1995, p. 103).

However, Widdicombe and Wooffitt do not claim to be members of those youth subcultures that were of interest to them in their selection of interviewees. Their participants' cautious responses to how they might describe themselves or their style, can be read as identity work to counter an interviewer's potentially uninformed or negative assumptions about the category being made salient by the interview. In the interviews with women alone, the interviewer was herself single, and I suggest that this makes the positioning work to avoid membership of the category 'single' the more remarkable. Some shared cultural assumptions between interviewer and interviewed might have been expected. It was possible for the category 'single' to be defined wholly in positive ways by participants in this supposedly 'safe' space. None the less, such 'trouble-free' examples were rare in my data.

Troubled desire

The second prevalent area of trouble among participants arose in relation to the interview question concerning wishes about future relationships or future marriage. It was striking

how often women appeared to be apologising for acknowledging a desire for commitment with a partner.

Extract 17

- | | | |
|----|-------|---|
| 1 | Jill | [...] These are just some final things; um, |
| 2 | | sort of summary things really, like, I |
| 3 | | think you've partly answered this but, I |
| 4 | | mean, let's just try you again. Do you |
| 5 | | feel that you're actively looking now for |
| 6 | | a long-term relationship, possibly? |
| 7 | Milly | Yes I think I am really. I've never been |
| 8 | | the party animal type; I've never been the |
| 9 | | one to want lots of dates. You know, I |
| 10 | | tend to be a one man woman I suppose and |
| 11 | | while it was never a big issue when I was |
| 12 | | younger, now I do appreciate the |
| 13 | | companionship side of things; I value that |
| 14 | | far more highly than perhaps I did before |
| 15 | | and I want someone to belong to and |
| 16 | | someone to belong to me, and I suppose, if |
| 17 | | I'm honest, yes I'm looking for a husband. |
| 18 | | Yes. I have to be specific. I don't think |
| 19 | | I want to go into another one of these, |
| 20 | | five or six year living together type |
| 21 | | situations; I don't really want that. I |
| 22 | | want to be married I suppose but, you |
| 23 | | know, I'm not feverish about it! I'm just |
| 24 | | hoping that it will happen in the near |
| 25 | | future. |

Milly presents an account of a pursuit of a long-term relationship in positive terms, so why does she frame the statement that she is looking for a husband with: 'if I'm honest' (lines 16 to 17)? This and similar phrases such as 'I must admit', 'I can't deny', 'in all honesty' occurred very frequently when women addressed the issue of future relationships. Often participants maintained that they were not actively looking for anyone. If it happened it would be nice, but it was not to be sought after. Where they did put a wish for a committed relationship more strongly this was usually framed as an admission. Similarly, research by Jamieson and colleagues (2002) with young people in their twenties found that women who presented themselves as open to a relationship said that they were not 'looking' for a relationship. The authors surmised that the women were only 'not looking' because they had a general rule against ever 'looking' (Jamieson *et al.*, 2002, p. 9).

Why does this discursive pattern appear? What kind of work is being done when women 'confess' to the desire for a relationship and present it as a 'truth'? Specifically, a truth

'underneath' what now becomes re-positioned as the 'rhetoric' of desirable independence. In many ways this is surprising in the light of the pattern highlighted in the previous section, where I suggested that women have a difficult task in relation to being single. They have to acknowledge their membership of the social category, distance themselves from the imputation of personal deficit, and build a positive account of themselves. Superficially, one might imagine that the subject position of 'looking for a husband' would help to ward off the position of personal deficit, and at times it did seem to be used in this way, as if to provide evidence that the speaker was doing her best. Yet it also appears to create trouble. One aspect is that these extracts from interviews need to be understood in the context of the interactions that occasioned them. In some traditions of research the phrase 'if I'm honest' might be taken as a more true and faithful statement of the speaker's desire for marriage. Potter has drawn attention to the problems in assuming that cognitive descriptions, talk of thoughts and feelings, actually give access to an inner world that tells something factual about the speaker's mental state (Potter, 1996b, pp. 103–104). He argues that cognitive descriptions should have no different status from an analytic point of view, than any other kind of statements. It is important to look at what participants are doing with their apparent admissions.

The phrase 'if I'm honest' might be construed as working to strengthen a claim, giving greater status to the veracity of the point about to be made. However, in the context of Extract 17 it can also be seen as an apology. The way that Jill has put the question on looking for a long-term relationship as 'let's just try you again' (line 4) can be heard as testing Milly's commitment to earlier answers. Milly has been invited to re-appraise her wishes, and what she is saying now runs against the grain of some earlier discussion on the merits of independence. To present her current response as a 'truth', and one that needs some accounting for, could be heard as acknowledgement of some contradiction with an account that generally stresses independence and freedom in being single.

Trouble may be arising from the highly idealised repertoires of singleness and the relative lack of discursive routes available to women to celebrate their single identity. If one avows

a strongly positive view of singleness then this makes the desire to move out of the category troublesome to express. What seems difficult to hold together in the current discursive climate is a positive construction of the category 'single' alongside the desire for a relationship. One seems to obviate the other. The positive constructions of the idealised repertoires seem to render the desire for a relationship difficult to admit.

This lack of discursive routes has connections with the trajectory of singleness, and whether indeed it might be considered to have a trajectory. Rhetorical work by women to position themselves as having potential to enter a field of relationships – including marriage – can be seen as countering a more static conception of singleness as a fixed identity without a trajectory in relationship terms. As I noted in Chapter 2, a model of identity frequently used in literature on singleness is that of the life cycle. The ways in which this has been developed seem to assume that singleness as a state is permanent, and that what changes over time is the single person's attitude to their state, involving, for instance, grieving, acceptance, developing a positive notion of the self (see Lewis and Moon, 1997). I discuss in Chapter 5 the dominant cultural storyline of marriage and family life, which is another kind of trajectory that my participants worked with, and at times against, in their own self-narratives. The notion of life stages, or ages, which imply particular kinds of relationship, connections to family, is a powerful one. It is visible in Milly's age-related account in lines 11 to 16 of Extract 17:

while it was never a big issue when I was younger, now I do appreciate the companionship side of things; I value that far more highly than perhaps I did before and I want someone to belong to and someone to belong to me,

Notions of companionship and belongingness are commonly represented as features that develop with an ageing, or maturing, process. Following on from this is a hard-to-define age or stage at which it becomes even more difficult for single women to talk of aspirations to marriage or companionship.

Milly disclaims any note of desperation: 'I'm not feverish about it' she states (line 23).

Having admitted that she is 'looking for a husband' (line 17) she then does some rhetorical work to distance herself from an identity of a needy single woman. Not being 'desperate'

was another frequently recurring subject position in my data. It has something of the status of what is 'sayable' (Hall, 1997) about singleness if one wishes to avoid the deficit repertoire. Given the ideological dilemmas generated by the available interpretative resources, the very best identity allowed to the single woman is to embrace independence, autonomy and self-development without remainder. The most shameful identity (as evidenced in what is warded off and avoided in the talk) is to express strong needs for others and to pitifully fail to have them met.

Some participants referred to an image of the single woman as 'predatory', which is the extreme case of this area of shame. This is a remarkably gendered image, which if ever applied to men does not conjure up the whole category of the single man in quite the same way as for women. Personal deficit for single women is marked by failure 'to get a man' or, as one participant noted, through the failure 'to be chosen by anyone'. Again there are traces of older discourses and continuities here with the notion that women are themselves to blame for their 'surplus' status. Such failures draw on the personal deficit and social exclusion repertoires, while single successes are constructed narrowly within the two idealised repertoires. So management of the personal identity is challenging indeed. One aspect of women's lives and experiences becomes mystified and pathologised. The next extract demonstrates this discursive and ideological tension being portrayed in psychological terms as splits and tensions within the self.

Extract 18

1	Marion	[...]You know, I think if, if I had a
2		choice, and you know I could have a
3		perfect person to be with, I'd much rather
4		have that than to be on my own. I can't
5		deny that (laughs). I was trying to, I was
6		trying to work out why I didn't want that
7		to happen but, because I know I want to
8		be, in my head I am perfectly happy and
9		content, but in my heart I am not really.

Marion in Extract 18 also frames her preference as an admission, 'I can't deny that' (lines 4 to 5). To deal with the dilemmas contained within the discourse of singleness she constructs a split or divided self, with head and heart going in different directions (lines 8

to 9). Splits within the available discursive resources become relocated as contradictions within women themselves. The subject position held is then one of ambivalence. The talk of a 'perfect person', however, does some complex work to sustain positive constructions of the single self. Marion effectively tempers her want as a serious choice by making it something potentially out of normal reach. It can feel dangerous to express a desire that may never be fulfilled and if it is portrayed as out of normal reach – perfection – then it is less undermining to claims to contentment with singleness.

Responses of apology for desire need to be seen as consequences of the extremely polarised interpretative resources of denigration and idealism that are available to women alone.

This combination does not provide women with a position from which they can express both positive feelings about their current single state and desires for a relationship. In the context of the highly idealised view of singleness developed in reaction to the strongly denigrated account, such desires become unacceptable because they challenge the basis of the idealisation in the third and fourth repertoire.

Working reflexively with the contradictions

The third way which I wish to discuss that women in my sample worked with the highly polarised repertoires of singleness was to address the contradictions more directly in their discussion, and to explore the consequences for their personal identity. This was a less common approach than the two negative strategies I have discussed. Extracts 19 to 21 are examples.

Extract 19

1	Rachel	I think I have some real contradictions
2		about it because I like being independent;
3		I think that I have a lot of admiration
4		and respect for other women who are on
5		their own, and so my kind of political and
6		principled beliefs are as a woman you
7		don't need a partner and it's okay to be
8		on your own, and yet at an emotional level
9		it's (.) I'm uncomfortable with that. I
10		think, well yes I can be jolly strong and
11		clear about, about it's okay to be on your
12		own, but that's actually not what I want.
13		Um, and I do feel that quite strongly, and
14		then feel a bit embarrassed about it, like

15 I'm letting the side down a bit. Or even
 16 letting myself down a bit when I say,
 17 'well you know things aren't complete
 18 unless I've got a man', which goes back to
 19 the kind of earlier thing about why have I
 20 not been able to achieve that. And so
 21 it's both wanting to be positive about
 22 women on their own, including myself, and
 23 yet having a yearning not to be.

In Extract 20 Jay is referring to a joke, which she says could be about any mother: 'How many Jewish mothers does it take to change a light bulb?' 'None, because it's all right dear, I'll just sit here in the dark'. She goes on, in lines 1 to 7 to explain how such passive stoicism features in her own way of presenting herself.

Extract 20

1	Jay	And I have got hell of a lot of that in me
2		and that has an awful lot to do with my
3		having spent, in retrospect quite a lot of
4		my life as a single person, because I
5		don't go out and get what I want. I don't
6		go out and get what I need, I sit and
7		suffer in silence. And I think that ties
8		up with being a bit unapproachable, and
9		not being the sort of person that people
10		would see as wanting to be in a
11		relationship. You know, you are generating
12		self sufficiency and acting it and here I
13		am, I am self sufficient, I am decisive, I
14		do this, I go here, I do that. So my image
15		is somebody who doesn't want to be any
16		different.

Extract 21

1	Susie	That core for me is, you know, marriage,
2		children, you know, ordinary family life
3		and so even though I've overlaid that with
4		layer upon layer of new stuff, which most
5		of the time is absolutely fine, at moments
6		of particular sort of pressure or
7		vulnerability then that's the bit that
8		comes back and says, you are therefore a
9		freak 'cos you're not in that situation
10		and totally loses sight of the fact that
11		I'm not made, or I have made myself now,
12		unsuitable for that and don't, really
13		don't need it. So, yes, lots of
14		contradictions, but I think along the
15		lines of wanting what you don't have.

The issue of a dilemma over desire and independence remains. Indeed, at first glance

Extract 19 seems to have little that distinguishes it from the extracts I have described as apologising for desire. What is different in these speakers' strategies is their

acknowledgement of the tension. Rachel, in Extract 19, for instance, raises the dilemmatic nature of both 'wanting to be positive about women on their own' (lines 21 to 22) and wanting a relationship. Like Marion, in Extract 18, all these speakers locate the tension in discursive resources as a contradiction within themselves. Rachel presents her wish for a partner as a 'truth' behind the more political position of 'it's okay to be on your own': saying that's 'actually not what I want' (line 12). Jay, in Extract 20, talks of 'not being the sort of person that people would see as wanting to be in a relationship' (lines 9 to 11) and 'generating self sufficiency' (lines 11 to 12). Implicit in this self-critical and ironical description is the unstated possibility that Jay might want a relationship. Susie, in Extract 21 talks of the contradictions of feeling a 'freak' (line 9) for not having the 'core' (line 1) of ordinary family life, while she has made herself 'unsuitable for that' (line 12) and doesn't really need it.

The speakers leave the dilemmas unresolved. What they do is to recognise the difficulties of inhabiting this troubled category and how it is seen by others. They work with the contradictions. While they continue to draw on the strongly positive repertoires of singleness, the positioning of these speakers is less idealised, more reflexive.

Conclusion

Singleness is a troubled category – not one that many women wish to align themselves with. Yet paradoxically, the positive and idealised interpretative resources that are available seem to make other aspects of single women's lives and expectations pathological. Women are faced with a difficult set of dilemmas. Either they can choose to construct singleness very positively through the repertoires of choice and independence and self-development and achievement, and then it becomes difficult to talk about any move out of the category. Or women can talk unashamedly about their desire for a relationship, and risk being constructed as deficient and 'desperate', and marked by their failure to already have a man. There seem to be few satisfactory ways out of these dilemmas given the contemporary politics of relationships. The only positive strategy used by a small number of women interviewed was to develop a reflexive account and talk about the dilemmas as

such, rather than alternating between each side of them as experiential truths.

CHAPTER 5

A narrative of relationships and singleness

And I ain't gonna be the woman that you left behind
 No I ain't gonna be the woman that you left behind
 If we meet on the road, well that's just fine
 But I ain't gonna be the woman that you left behind.

(Woehrle Btong, 1980)

Introduction

The dominant cultural storyline for the lives of women is one of marriage and family relationships. In this chapter I argue that women who are on their own have to do rhetorical work that deals with this cultural storyline in presenting a positive account of a life and relationships. The previous chapter gave a number of examples of how women draw on common interpretative repertoires to work with their identity. This chapter will focus in the main on extracts from just one interview, in order to examine in more detail the kind of narrative and rhetorical work undertaken by a participant in explaining her life and relationships. The extracts form a 'self-narrative' (Gergen, K. J., 1994). In Chapter 6 I consider a range of narratives from different participants.

The narratives that people develop for their emotional lives are deeply connected with their sense of self (Lupton, 1998). In talking of their lives, participants are nevertheless undertaking a form of psycho-discursive practice, taking their personal accounts from a cultural repertoire, and constructing their identity in the telling (Gergen, M, 1994). They present themselves as persons who are psychological, moral and competent. They demonstrate that they are *relational* persons, talking their relationships into being (Duck, 1995). It is important to look in detail at just how such narratives are told, how individuals deal with the potential trouble attached to their category and use their narrative to perform their identity.

Three research questions shape this chapter. What kind of identity work is involved in giving a narrative account of relationships? How does a woman alone explain how she got to where she is now? What resources does she draw on to describe her experiences and feelings?

Analytic concepts

The field of narrative studies is very broad and includes a wide range of different disciplines, each with distinctive approaches to what is considered important for analysis.

I discuss first a range of approaches that have some relevance to my study before describing my own discursive approach to understanding narrative.

Relevant approaches

For the social sciences in general, narrative analysis has provided a way of returning to people's 'stories'. Within psychology, there is debate over how far a speaker's narrative gives access to a consistent identity and reflects the reality of lived experience (Crossley, 2000) or allows for different identities to be performed according to the context of social interaction (Edley, 2002; Riessman, 2002; Taylor, 2003b).

There has been considerable interest in the influence of narrative traditions on how people render their own life stories. Ricoeur (1992), writing of the connections between life and fiction, sees subjectivity as a narratively achieved identity that is done within the relevant cultural traditions. He argues that we never cease to reinterpret the narrative identity that constitutes us in the light of the narratives proposed to us by our own culture. This does not mean, for Ricoeur, that our lives are *told* by the stories already in existence. Instead we search for stories with which to render our lives, and this includes potential stories, stories that have not yet been told.

From a social psychology perspective, Bruner suggests that the criteria for what makes a story worth telling are related both to the canonical (the well understood and expected sequence of behaviour or events) and breaches of the canonical (which are also familiar, but often portray human plights such as the betrayed wife, the cuckolded husband). In a passage that I find very relevant to the story-telling tasks of single women reflecting on their lives, he remarks that while narrative is normative, it is not culturally terminal.

Narratives deal with 'trouble' but do not have to resolve it: 'the "consoling plot" is not the comfort of a happy ending but the comprehension of plight that, by being made

interpretable, becomes bearable' (Bruner, 1991, p. 16).

Some discussion on similar lines from Andrews and others (2002) has sought to bring together such 'counter-narratives' and the resistance that they offer to 'dominant cultural storylines' or 'master narratives' (which, while not fully defined, seem to be similar to Bruner's 'canonical narratives'). The argument is that members of outgroups tell stories to themselves and others that help to document and even validate a different, and 'counter' reality. While they may be experienced and articulated differently, they have some common meanings, and can subvert the strongly held prescriptions around, for instance, 'motherhood', what constitutes a 'family' (Throsby, 2002) and 'proper' sexual behaviour for older women (Jones, 2002).

Drawing on insights from conversational analysis, Schegloff (1997a) has cautioned against assuming that the interview context has no effect on a narrative produced by a speaker. He points out that a story must be considered within its interactional context, in order to see what functions it fulfils. Stories are not pre-packaged, and simply waiting to be solicited or elicited by the interviewer's approach to questioning. The story will be jointly produced or co-constructed between the interviewer and the narrator (Schegloff, 1997a).

A number of narrative analysts have commented on the patterned consistency of the movement of certain types of stories through narrative time and space, and the potential for identifying narrative 'genres' (Todorov, 1990; Bruner, 1991; Jacobs, 2000). Gergen argues that the structure of a good story requires it to reach a valued end-point, and be either progressive or regressive, with a stability theme being a third possibility (Gergen, K. J., 1994). The progressive narrative charts the course temporally towards the valued end-point and shows how related events move steadily towards the accomplishment of this point. The regressive narrative has a negative state as the end-point, for instance death of a friend or other loss, and each event brings the protagonist closer to this end-point. A stability narrative might be a story of continuing success having achieved an earlier goal, although as Gergen and Gergen (1987) point out this has some difficulties as an option,

furnishing a picture of stagnation and lacking dramatic force. Looking at the use of these genres in accounts of relationships, Gergen and Gergen (1987) note that married couples may have a shared story of 'how we got together'. They suggest that once stability has been reached there can be a temptation to engage in a regressive narrative 'I fear we are falling out of love' (Gergen and Gergen, 1987, p. 283).

A discursive approach to narrative

Gergen refers to 'self-narratives', and his definition has been useful to me for identifying narratives in my data for analysis:

an individual's account of the relationship among several self-relevant events across time. In developing a self-narrative we establish coherent connections among life events.

(Gergen, K. J., 1994, p. 187)

While there are undoubtedly links between literary construction and the ordinary construction of a person's self-narrative, I find there are limitations to how faithfully any self-narrative can be expected to conform to a literary genre. Within the context of an interview, or indeed in other kinds of conversation, the self-narrative does not have a uni-directional form that moves seamlessly without deviation from start point to valued end-point. The co-construction of narratives in conversation means that there is not a single story waiting to be brought forward by one speaker. The story can instead take different turns according to the construction of the conversation. Rather than seeing 'progressive' or 'regressive' as identifiable genres by which the narratives of women alone can be typified, I look at the notions of progress or decline as resources which people may draw on but not necessarily use in a consistent way in telling their self-narrative.

My interest in narrative is as a discursive resource. I am interested in the patterns of meaning that are evident in participants' narratives, and the ways in which they construct an identity or identities. This does not mean that talk can never be reliably informative about events and circumstances, but that this is not the focus of my analysis (Taylor, 2003a). I expect narratives and the structures employed in them to relate to how women constitute themselves within the interaction (Abell *et al.*, 2000). Like Riessman (1993), I

assume that narratives are essential meaning-making structures, and that researchers must respect respondents' ways of constructing meaning. When women who are alone are talking about their lives, they are dealing with something intensely personal and trying to make sense of their experiences. It is none the less important to analyse how that meaning making is accomplished, and my interest is in this, rather than the 'windows into lives' that Riessman also refers to (Riessman, 2002, p. 707).

The process of living in the cultural 'slots' and identity possibilities for singleness constructed by social history, social practices and the surrounding ideological field is a personal identity project for individual single women. In developing their self-narratives and making sense of their lives, people work up the available discursive resources as identity. The self-narrative provides participants with a way to manage their identity. Mishler (1999) brings a number of points together that I see as central to my analysis, in understanding personal narratives as socially situated actions, identity performances and combinations of form and content. People do not simply relay information about themselves, they present events in recognised forms that correspond to story-telling, and draw on culturally available resources to perform their identity, in ways that will vary according to context and purpose. I anticipate that women will tell their self-narratives within their cultural tradition, drawing on shared ideas of what makes a good story, what kind of stories it is appropriate to tell about one's self, and attending to the dominant cultural storylines of women as wives and mothers.

As discussed above, I have not found it helpful to make a simple division of my participants' self-narratives as either progressive or regressive towards a valued end-point. Instead, I draw on Goffman's (1974) concept of 'frame' as a tool for analysis that I have adapted in my own way to more fully account for the variability that I found in my data. Goffman is interested in the multiple worlds and multiple realities to which people can attend in their talk: for instance, the world of 'everyday life' co-existing with worlds of make-believe, the theatre and dreams. His perspective is situational, meaning a concern

for what one individual can be attending to at any given moment. He suggests that in taking part in any interaction, the individuals involved face the question: 'What is it that's going on here?' (Goffman, 1974, p. 8). Goffman uses 'frame' as a concept for identifying how participants may have dealt with this question. By frame, he refers to moment-to-moment changes in how participants define their encounters. He assumes that whatever an individual takes to be going on, may turn out to be mistaken, and that constant re-readings of the situation will be required, so that many frames will be employed in any encounter.

My use of 'frame' is more broad-brush. I use it to refer to some over-arching structures that my participants employed in their narratives. However, my use of the word allows for recognition of the situated nature of their accounts, and the context in which they were given. These structures also served as a frame for the encounter between interviewer and interviewed as participants, women of similar relationship status and sometimes similar and sometimes contrasting ages. The frames are co-constructed between us as participants. They can, in addition, be thought of as frames for the more invisible encounter that participants have in a research interview with an assumed research audience or readership.

Examining self-narratives, and in this chapter focusing in particular on one participant's account, is an opportunity to take a different lens to my material, and for different insights to emerge. I will also continue to refer to the concepts I used in Chapter 4, of the dominant interpretative repertoires drawn on by participants, and the ideological dilemmas and subject positions that open up in their self-narratives. The concept of subject position is particularly apposite to an exploration of identity as performed in self-narrative, since it is the concept that connects wider notions of discourses and dominant cultural storylines to the social construction of particular selves (Edley, 2001). Edley (2001) quotes Hall's claim that identity is formed 'at the unstable point where the "unspeakable" stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of a culture' (Hall, 1988, p. 44). The speaker's identity is constructed by the different kinds of person, or subject positions, that are implied by

particular ways of telling one's self-narrative. On similar lines, Harré and van Langenhove describe a position in a conversation as 'a metaphorical concept through reference to which a person's "moral" and personal attributes as a speaker are compendiously collected' (Harré and van Langenhove, 1991, p. 395).

Analytic process

I analysed data for stretches of text that were in the form of a narrative about past relationships, and a separate data file was created of all such examples. My criteria for recognising a self-narrative were very broad; unlike some analysts I did not require talk to be organised around a beginning, middle and end, or introduced and closed with entrance and exit talk (Riessman, 1993). Gergen's definition of a self-narrative given above (Gergen, K. J., 1994) provides a good description of what I searched for: passages that had some sequencing and movement from one event or relationship to another. I looked for accounts that seemed to connect up with earlier or later references and that were explanatory rather than simply descriptive. Participants sometimes moved back and forth temporally in talking of past relationships so examples were not always neatly sequenced. The main question in my interviews that in particular sought to elicit a narrative was one about important relationships in the participant's life and her understanding of how she had got to where she was now. The exact form of my question varied according to what the participant had already said. One fairly typical request was: 'I'm asking people about sort of relationships, intimate relationships over the course of the life and obviously that could be a huge area; I'm not asking for detailed accounts but just to get a sense of how you make sense, really, of the course your life's taken and where you find yourself now'. Additionally, in the first stage of the interview, in response to an invitation from me to 'just say a few things to introduce yourself, say who you are and what you do', participants sometimes opened their self-descriptions by talking about past relationships or marriages. My later question would acknowledge this, for instance one person was asked: 'You've said quite a bit really about important relationships, but there might be others that you'd want

to say have been important in the course of your life, and I suppose what I'm interested in is what, well, how you understand the kind of shape that your life's taken, that you haven't remarried, or found someone that you would elevate to position of partner? How do you make sense of that?'

Most of the data compiled in this file was in relation to the questions referred to above, and it all came from the 26 individual interviews, since I did not ask the women in the group interview about their lives to date. I grouped together lengthy extracts (including interviewer questions and comments) from individual interviews that I identified as contributing to a participant's self-narrative (or narratives) across the interview as a whole. Questions, and their responses, that did not invoke a relationship history, for instance questions on images of singleness or future expectations were not included in this data file.

In some cases participants spoke of episodes or gave an overview of their relationships within one turn of talk, and at times I refer to these shorter, more bounded accounts as 'stories'. I have looked for commonalities in the ways that participants told their self-narratives, and done a more fine-grained analysis of the subject positions that are opened up through the jointly constructed narratives and stories.

Frames in a narrative

A striking pattern in participants' self-narratives was the use of three frames that at different points dominated the way in which they spoke. In one extended turn of talk Sarah demonstrates all three: most other participants employed only one or two. I call these frames *life cycle*, *life events* and *life as progress*. Although for purposes of analysis I consider each of these here separately, it will also be evident that these frames are linked. They are used in overlapping ways within Sarah's narrative account.

Life cycle

Sarah is a 50-year-old woman who has remained single.

Extract 1 Twenties

15	Sarah	[...]	I
16		actually lost my brother when I was 21 so	
17		er, somewhat tragically, so that was a	
18		major influence for me in terms of my,	
19		certainly all of my twenties. So the men	
20		that I went out with, I mean I went a bit	
21		mad really I think, in retrospect, but I	
22		went travelling, I went out with loads of	
23		guys, was not interested in (.) long-term	
24		relationships; there was no way I was ever	
25		going to be close to anyone, so I think,	
26		you know, that's, that was very	
27		influential (.) and has been, I think, in	
28		many respects um (.) ongoingly.	

The stages that Sarah refers to in this and later extracts are ones of which she says: 'I can it see in decades almost'. First the 'twenties' in Extract 1. Youth is often depicted as a time of trying out different relationships and of fickleness in romantic attachments. However, Sarah's story is inflected with the early loss of her brother and she draws on a psychodynamic model of identity to explain a continuing influence from this loss. Sarah responds to my request to sketch out what choices she has made, what people in the course of her life she has been close to and how she explains it to herself. My question is complex and hedged about with qualifications (see Appendix 8 for the extended transcript of Sarah's narrative from which these extracts are taken and for the opening question). I do not ask 'why didn't you ever marry?' but Sarah nevertheless responds to this unasked question with an abstract (Labov, 1972) that pinpoints the death of her brother as a major influence.

No individuals are picked out by Sarah in this period of her twenties. She parcels up this period as one in which she adopted the same attitude to all the men she went out with.

While the notion of relationships that do not go very deep is not an uncommon way to talk of youth, this is not a story of carefree times. Sarah combines a strong sense of the reaction to the loss of her brother with a sense of her own agency in opting for 'loads of guys' and not 'going to be close to anyone'. In positioning herself as active and in control in her relationships with men, Sarah is also dealing with the interpretative repertoire of singleness as deficit: that a woman who has remained single has not been chosen by a

man. She avoids one troubled subject position, but the link she makes with the influence of her brother's loss takes her to another kind of trouble, that of a woman who is not able to get close to a man. As with most people reflecting on the past, Sarah presents the past from the perspective of present realities and values (Riessman, 2002). She speaks from a different place from that of the wild 20 year old who 'went a bit mad really'.

In the next extract Sarah has moved on to her 'thirties'.

Extract 2 Thirties

37	Sarah	[...]	So, and then
38		in my thirt-	I mean I can see it in
39		decades almost really,	in, in my thirties
40		I started going out with people for longer	
41		and (.) um I suppose it's timing really.	
42		I mean that's how I would see that, you	
43		know, there were some people I wasn't	
44		ready for and some people who weren't	
45		ready for me really in terms of (.) what	
46		you wanted out of your life; whether you	
47		wanted to have kids, set- you know, live	
48		with somebody etc. and, um (.) I certainly	
49		think of my thirties there was one person	
50		I met in my thirties who probably the only	
51		person I would have (.) actually married;	
52		I mean marriage has never been	
53		particularly an issue but he is somebody	
54		that probably I, I would have married but,	
55		you know, it didn't work out; we were in	
56		different places really.	

In her account of her thirties Sarah addresses more directly the normative life cycle of marriage and child-rearing. This decade provides the moment where she identifies a person she would have married but 'it didn't work out'. 'Timing' is offered as an explanation – other people were at different places with their life courses unrolling at a different pace to Sarah's. No blame for unfortunate timing attaches either to herself or to the people she went out with 'for longer'. Sarah positions herself as 'reasonable' here and throughout her life and relationships narrative.

Although marriage as such has 'never been particularly an issue' Sarah none the less uses the idea of marriage both to convey the importance of the relationship that didn't work out and briefly to introduce the possibility of an alternative life cycle that she did not take. She moves momentarily from her first person narrative to the more impersonal 'you' in lines

46 and 47 in talking of 'what you wanted out of your life; whether you wanted to have kids' and repairs what seems to be the start of a reference to 'settle down', in line 47, substituting instead 'live with somebody'. The repair conveys a rather more impermanent potential future. Sarah distances herself from ownership of hopes and dreams of having kids and settling down (using the universal 'you' instead of 'I') in contrast with what she describes as actually taking place.

Sarah is dealing with an ideological dilemma here (Billig *et al.*, 1988). Women who have not seen marriage as their goal have not necessarily rejected a wish for long-term partnership. Do they use the language of marriage, commitment and children, or do they attempt to define relationships in other ways? Sarah responds to the implicit request to account for her single status, and gives evidence of a relationship that had potential as a marital type relationship, while maintaining that marriage was not an issue for her. Even then it is not clear that she is against marriage as such: in lines 53 and 54 she says he is someone that probably she would have married. Is she using 'would have' in the hypothetical sense of she would have lived with him in what would have been a marriage had she been the marrying kind, but might have instead been a committed and long-term relationship? Or is she saying that she would have married him if that had been what he wanted and he had pressed her enough? The meaning is ambiguous, allowing both possibilities to remain open. Bauman identifies in the modern 'liquid love' the possibility for people to 'follow simultaneously the drive for freedom and the craving for belonging' (Bauman, 2003, p.34), and Sarah seems to be playing out these contradictory drives in her narrative.

The next extract relates to the 'forties'.

Extract 3 Forties

57	Sarah	[...]	My forties
58		were, I was much more together, um (.) and	
59		made, I suppose that's when I made the	
60		sort of most together choices of leaving a	
61		relationship I'd been in for a while	
62		because, I just felt that wasn't right for	
63		me really and that felt like a major step	

64 for me, to not just be batting around, you
65 know, letting things happen to me really.

Just one action is chosen to stand as representative of this decade. Rather than discuss more directly a relationship that she had 'been in for a while', Sarah highlights her choice to leave. She presents this decision as strongly positive: 'most together'. Sarah continues to give a balanced and non-blaming account, the relationship 'wasn't right for me really'. However, by presenting this as a 'major step' with herself more active and in control, she re-positions herself in the earlier stages as having less agency, 'batting around' and 'letting things happen to me'.

Sarah's 'stages' account conveys an overall impression of 'naturalness'. One stage follows another. In her story relationships are presented as fitting with maturational processes, rather than as full of struggle and difficulty. 'Timing' is one kind of explanation she offers: the different life cycle imperatives of individuals not always meshing.

'Timing' often has a special resonance for women, in relation to the biologically and socially limited time frame for childbearing. The next extract is from an interview with Patsy. The extract follows Patsy's response to a question on whether having children was important to her. Patsy replies that while she was in her last relationship, she would have wanted children, but that her partner was younger than her and did not want them at that time. She says that now she is 43 it is not an issue for her. Following a discussion from Patsy about how often women who have had children have said to her: 'don't you regret not having had children?' the exchange in Extract 4 takes place.

Extract 4

1	Jill	For some women it obviously is very
2		important and that's the drive that's more
3		important than finding the right man to be
4		with.
5	Patsy	Yes
6	Jill	It's the person to have children with.
7	Patsy	Yes, which is never really been, that's
8		never been at the front of my mind, I've
9		always wanted that (.) soul-mate to be
10		with, you know rather than the children
11		that come from, you know from that
12		relationship really. But I've had a lot of

- 13 people, a lot of women say to me, and I
 14 suppose to a certain extent that I agree
 15 with them, that, that I spent you know,
 16 that 'the best years', or the kind of
 17 final years, of my possible child-bearing
 18 time with [name] and that he, you know he
 19 wasn't fair to me in those times. And I
 20 never really looked at it like that, but I
 21 suppose I look back now and think oh yes I
 22 s'pose he did. But a lot of women say
 23 that, a lot of women say how selfish he
 24 was.
- 25 Jill Mm (.) About your relationship?
- 26 Patsy About, yeah, and the fact that I was you
 27 know, I met him when I was, how old would
 28 I have been, 30 (.) how old am I now, I
 29 met him ten years ago so I'd have been
 30 about 32, 33 when I first met him. And
 31 then I was about 36 when we got, 37
 32 probably when we got into a relationship.
 33 Um (.) so he knew, you know.
- 34 Jill It was a crucial time in terms of, if you
 35 had
- 36 Patsy Yes, that's right.

Patsy in lines 7 to 24 treats Jill's comment as inviting further explanation of her own views. The voices are invoked of other women who accused Patsy's partner of not being 'fair' and 'selfish'. People often use the authoritative voice of others as a rhetorical resource to support their own views or as something to argue against (Bakhtin and Volosinov, cited by Maybin, 2001, pp. 69–69). The attribution of views to unnamed others rather than being presented as Patsy's own view gives the point additional force. These accusations position Patsy as a wronged woman, but one who is herself reasonable about this wrong (lines 19 to 20). She herself never looked at it this way, and only with hindsight does she see that she could agree with it. As with Sarah's reflections on marriage and children, Patsy's expressed feelings about whether her partner was unfair and selfish, and whether she minds, are fluid and ambiguous. The socially and culturally defined working up of an emotion (Lupton, 1998) appears to be in evidence here. If others see us as unfairly treated, we can come to see ourselves in this way too.

Patsy refers to her age at different points of their acquaintance and subsequent relationship, and moves without further explanation to her evaluation: 'so he knew, you know'. That her meaning is accepted by Jill is shown by the incomplete response: 'It was a

crucial time in terms of, if you had' (lines 34 to 35). Both women are invoking the dominant cultural storyline (Andrews, 2002) of the right time for having children, and tacitly suggesting that women's lives are structured around the potential for this activity whether or not it is an option they wish to take up.

Analysts of narratives comment on their chronological structure and sequencing (Labov and Waletzky, 1967), and the expectation from interviewers of temporally sequenced plots (Riessman, 1993). The classic identity model of a 'life cycle' portrays individuals negotiating universal aspects of development that present the need to adapt and change at key transitional points. As I discussed in Chapter 2, these transitional points or stages are usually designated as courtship, early marriage, birth of children, family with adolescents, children leaving home, retirement and old age (Carter and McGoldrick, 1980). However, despite the cultural prevalency of the belief that there is a clearly defined developmental series of stages that contribute to the achievement of identity, this belief has been widely criticised by narrative analysts (Josselson, 1996; Mishler, 1999).

It may seem rather banal to note that Sarah divided her account into stages, and appear to lend support to a developmental model for the life cycle, which is not my intention. The depiction of a life cycle made up of stages or transitions provides a frame for narrating the relationships over the course of life. It is also a map to which some women may feel obliged to refer to in explaining the route they have taken. I point to the parallels in my data with a life cycle perspective not to support its universality as a developmental framework, but to suggest that it is a resource that people use in trying to make sense of their own lives (see also Plummer, 2001, pp. 191–193).

The life cycle offers a familiar frame and trajectory for telling a self-narrative, and an apparently natural way of ordering and conceptualising choices and decisions. It divides time up into discrete and boundaried stages in a tidy way, while allowing for some change from one stage to the next. A life cycle frame does not have to consist of prescribed stages; women can characterise and define their own preferred conception of stages that make

sense to them. At the same time, by reference to the culturally established life cycle model, single women can tackle, directly or indirectly, the issue of discussing the opportunities that they have had for establishing family and partnership relationships. In this sense it is both a resource that single women can use actively and shape to their own ends, and a dominant cultural storyline that single women may want to position themselves against.

Life events

If there is a dominant life cycle storyline that forms part of expectations of how a life should be, another familiar narrative form is of events that change the life cycle. From the perspective of narrative analysis, life events such as chronic illness have been theorised as creating 'biographical disruption' with implications for the disruption of social relationships and the ability to mobilise material resources (Bury, 1982). A relationship has been noted in narratives between discontinuities in career paths and other events that seem relatively independent of them: divorce, depression or a move to another city, for instance (Mishler, 1999).

In an analysis that combines a life course with a life events perspective, Allen found that the single women born in 1910 in her study experienced 'not getting married as a process made up of a series of events and transitions in childhood and young adulthood that cut across life course careers' (Allen, 1989). The image of the spinster who failed to marry because of an early disappointment is a familiar one in novels, Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations* being a prime example. The First World War famously left a generation of women whose lives were considered to be disrupted by the loss of their boyfriends or fiancés.

My focus is not in investigating the reality of claims that lives have been changed by unpleasant events, but in exploring how past events are used as explanatory frames by single women talking of their lives and relationships. I look on a life events perspective, the notion that unpleasant events can throw a life off its planned course, as another resource upon which my participants drew in making meaning of and describing the shape

of their lives to date. The events that participants referred to as life-changing and affecting their subsequent relationships included the death of a brother, the ending of an important relationship, an early sterilisation, going to boarding school, and acquiring a mental illness label.

Sarah recounted in Extract 1 the influence of the early death of her brother on her subsequent relationships. Extract 5 forms the coda (Labov, 1972) to what Sarah has already said and she returns to her brother's early death as providing an overall explanation.

Extract 5

84	Jill	Right.
85	Sarah	But I do think my brother's death actually
86		has had a major influence in me not
87		actually 'settling', for want of a better
88		word, with somebody.

Sarah does not attempt to justify how the influence of her brother's death explains her attitude to long-term relationships, and Jill does not query the connection being made. This influence could be seen as an explanation competing with 'timing' as the reason for Sarah's not settling with someone. The two are interwoven throughout her story but are, however, also inter-linked. A psychological journey has been route-marked by Sarah. Short-term relationships are seen as the outcome of her distress at the loss, and also as the result of her part in the wrong timing, when she was not ready for a close relationship. Attributing strong and continuing influence to a major life event could position a speaker as a passive victim. It could also provide an excuse for the subsequent pattern of events, letting the speaker off the hook in a way that could be seen as 'bad faith' and a failure to grapple with personal responsibility for choices made (Craib, 2000). Sarah intertwines the twin themes of loss and timing that does not fit. This makes it hard to discern what functions each of these fulfils in her narrative. It appears that timing, as an explanation, has a stronger effect of distancing Sarah from any sense of agency than the reflection on her loss does. However, since Sarah accounts for her difficulties in matching timing through the driving motif of loss, it could be argued that it is functioning to absolve her of

some responsibility. Sarah does not position herself in these extracts as a victim, rather as a person working with grief, developing and growing in the course of dealing with it. I return to discussion of this in relation to a frame of life as progress.

Metaphors of journeys and paths abound in the talk of interviewer and those interviewed.

In answer to Jill's question: 'Can you say something about important relationships over your life, and I'm looking really for the kind of sketch that's saying how you make sense, if you do, as to why you're now on your own really and what kind of path you've taken through life in terms of close relationships?' Rachel plays with the metaphor of the path, and explains that when she was younger, her contemporaries were getting married and having families. She says she felt odd or different by choosing not to, but found no one with whom she wanted to follow the same path, and felt that she was sticking to a principle of being on her own rather than in a relationship she didn't want. After the ending of one intense and important relationship in her twenties she built up her life in other ways around work and friends and still felt she was holding out for something very special. When she met the person who became her partner for many years, they had what she thinks was a very good relationship: 'that clearly suited me extraordinarily well, both in terms of intimacy and freedom; and nurturing and a whole load of things'. But the partnership ended when he went off with someone else and 'in terms of the path then I suppose I'm now on the sort of path of, you know, being on my own, but now clearer that's not how I want to be'. Rachel queries whether she has made sense or said enough about a 'path' in her responses so far, and in Extract 6 she describes how she sees this.

Extract 6

1	Rachel	I think I'm rather, sort of, startled at
2		the ending (.) of the path I was on with
3		[name], (laughs) actually. And I think
4		that really, really threw me, both
5		emotionally, obviously, and my sense of
6		self-esteem and blah blah blah; all of
7		that, but also my sense of a path because
8		the path, you know, we were staying
9		together and we were going to grow old
10		together and we were going to go round the
11		world in a camper van when we were 90,
12		and, and that's the surest I've ever been

13 of a path; I've never been that sure of a
 14 path and it was a bit of a blow, and so
 15 I'm having to sort of re-create paths, a
 16 path, now because that was the one I was
 17 on and I was really happy with it; I liked
 18 that path.

The event of Rachel's partner leaving is depicted as putting an end to the path they were jointly following. Rachel does not minimise her reaction, she moves from 'startled' (line 1) to 'really, really threw me' (line 4) intensifying the impact. At the same time there is an ironic note to how she tells this story, with the more throwaway 'blah blah blah' (line 6) as a shorthand for the many effects of the relationship's termination, the understatement in line 14 'bit of a blow' and the use of rhythmical, poetic language to describe the plans now not to be realised.

The repetition of 'we were' and 'we were going' in each of lines 8 to 10 is followed by a repetition of 'path' in lines 13 to 18. The image of a path through life came from Jill's question, but Rachel has appropriated it and worked with it. Again the story is potentially one of a victim, but Rachel resists this position while at the same time asserting her commitment and faithfulness to the projected future that is now not to be. This is quite an unusual accomplishment. In talking of relationships that had ended some time previously, participants often denigrated their importance, or reflected chiefly on what was problematic. Rachel holds onto her story of the rightness of her last partnership, while recognising that she has to 're-create paths'.

By exploring Sarah and Rachel's use of life events as a frame I do not want to undermine the meaning of events for participants. However, a narrative of real or potential relationships disrupted and influenced by an earlier life event is also an explanatory frame that provides single women with an easily recognisable justification for their current state. That recognition owes something to psychological and lay storylines of loss and change. The life events frame introduces a wider canvas to narratives than a focus on the dynamics of intimate relationships.

It could be argued that the use of a life events frame and talk of paths and journeys in

narration fits within a more classic narrative genre, the tragic or regressive narrative. Bury quotes Robinson (building on the ideas of Gergen and Gergen, 1987) as characterising regressive narratives as having ‘a continual and increasing discrepancy between “valued personal goals” and the possibility of their attainment’ (Robinson, 1990, p. 1178, quoted in Bury, 2001). However, as I shall show in discussion of my final frame ‘life as progress’, unpleasant life events and the unfolding history that is narrated can also be combined with a progressive narrative. As Bury (2001) has pointed out, many accounts move from one narrative form to another, and the degree of consistency achieved will depend on the context in which the narrative is constructed and presented.

Life as progress

The two frames already identified link in Sarah’s story with a frame of life as progress to provide a narrative that overall achieves a sense of progression. Frequently participants avoided a troubled subject position of having failed at relationships and family life by bringing forward the ways in which they were succeeding at other goals, or more generally improving psychologically and emotionally. This frame is more easily seen in looking at a longer extract of a life and relationships narrative.

There are tensions between making generalisations from data for narrative analysis and giving the close attention to narrative form that is required to back up such claims (Riessman, 1993, p. 70). In order both to look at the detail of Sarah’s narrative, and to make some comparison with other data, I have presented it in the decades that she herself identifies. I now want to turn to the whole stretch of talk of her extended turn and the question that it was a response to, reproduced in Appendix 8.

In lines 28 to 37 Sarah gives an evaluative (Labov, 1972) reflection on her depiction of her twenties and the causal relationship she traces between her brother’s death and her behaviour when she ‘went a bit mad really’. She distances herself from the influence that she has just claimed her brother’s death had on her in an ongoing way by saying ‘it’s more in its place now than it’s ever been’ (29–30), and links this to feeling ‘better now

emotionally than I've ever been' (31–32). This is a very rapid and immediate contrast with the troubled subject position of not 'settling' with somebody because of grief from her loss. She then, in lines 35 to 36, in apparent response to Jill's question about choices and people, characterises her choices in this stage as short-term relationships and 'no threat people'. Having made a claim of serious and lasting consequences from her loss, Sarah is able to redress the balance by pointing to psychological repair. She makes it clear that this is not to be heard as a story that gets worse over time. This also goes some way to defuse the potential for construing her subsequent discussion of her thirties as a time of disappointment and failure to settle down.

In lines 56 and 57 Sarah adds another comment that may persuade the listener or reader to hear her narrative overall as progressive: 'it's got better each decade actually'. As I have already noted she presents the ending of a relationship in her forties as a positive choice. To round off her account she reflects on her current state and what she expects from this decade. The relationship, the person she has chosen and her inner state (more centred), lines 67 to 74, are all very different. In response to an earlier question in the interview, when Jill enquired whether Sarah had someone she would call a partner, Sarah described this person as 'somebody very much in my life that I see regularly and that I sleep with and that, you know, I share things with but I don't know that I'd call him a partner'. However, the reference to a relationship that is different, which by implication carries more potential than previous ones continues to build the story here as one that has a positive outcome.

Finally Sarah returns to the twin themes of timing and her brother's death as the explanation for not having settled with somebody (lines 83 to 88). As in this extract from Sarah, many of the events referred to by different participants had taken place when the speaker was much younger, and typically speakers would position this earlier self as an innocent young girl, more victim than active agent. Later, the young girl might give way to a more mature woman, with agency and the ability to make choices about relationships.

In Extract 7 Lyn ends a story of important relationships which has been also been presented in stages characterised by different kinds of relationship at different points in her life course. The story included feeling devastated when her first man left her 'overnight' – an event to which she attributes some continuing impact.

Extract 7

1	Lyn	And then recently, just before I was 50, I
2		had a very short affair with somebody (.)
3		and it felt good because it (laughing)
4		made me realise it was still possible! And
5		that felt very positive. I also realised
6		this time that when the man was not
7		willing to negotiate with me about what
8		our relationship was going to be, and how
9		it was going to be, then I was able to
10		say, 'in that case I don't want this
11		relationship' (.) and that was the first
12		time that I had the strength to say, 'I'm
13		worth more than this and if you're not
14		willing to negotiate with me and to agree
15		to certain things, then I'm not willing
16		just to be here for you when you feel like
17		it'. So it took until I was 49 for me to
18		have the strength to say that and that
19		feels very positive. At the same time it
20		enabled me to realise what I was missing,
21		and that was very painful.
22		So I suppose I see, theoretically, in the
23		future, that I might have a relationship,
24		and that I hope I will, and that I hope it
25		will be as good as some aspects of the
26		last relationship and I know that if I do
27		have a relationship with a man it will be
28		much more aware than any of the ones I had
29		in the past and that I won't stand for any
30		nonsense (laughing), or if I do it will be
31		because we've negotiated it.

In this extract Lyn is telling about the ending of a relationship: potentially a regressive account. However, like Sarah in lines 60 to 65, Lyn presents the positive aspect of making a decision to end a relationship that was unsatisfactory. While Sarah refers to putting an end to 'batting around' and 'letting things happen to me', Lyn reports herself as saying 'I'm not willing just to be here for you when you feel like it' (lines 15 and 16). Both women draw on and rebut an interpretative repertoire of women as passive and waiting for men to make the moves. In its place they employ a repertoire of women seizing power, albeit negative power. Lyn's use of reported speech and repetition that the man was 'not willing to negotiate' gives her a subject position of 'strong and forthright' in this instance, even if

it took until she was 49. Her comment in lines 19 to 21 that it was painful to recognise what she was missing can appear to be a digression, but it works to position her as appreciative of the potential of a good relationship, and thus emphasises her femininity. It also acts as a bridge to her coda summing up where she is now (lines 26 to 31) – someone ready for a more mature relationship with a man.

Commentators suggest that women and men search for the right way to live in a society which focuses on the growth of the individual. Love is elusive, but remains idealised and invested with hopes for a better future (Giddens, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). Sarah's story exemplifies the ideological dilemma for a person not currently involved in a committed partnership of giving a positive account. The women in my study were often drawing on idealised interpretative repertoires of singleness as involving independence and achievement. They also recognised, and worked to counter, more denigrated repertoires of singleness as personal deficit and as social exclusion. Employing a frame of life as progress involved presenting a story that drew on psychological self-improvement, while admitting, and perhaps opening up, the possibility for better relationships in the future. Margaret Gullette has pointed to what she finds encouraging narratives of midlife women in 'progress novels', that can combat cultural stereotypes of midlife as inevitable decline (Gullette, 1988; 1997). In the same way, depicting one's life as a story of progress offers a resource to women, allowing them to find a valued end-point of their own choosing that does not have to be the story of a happy-ever-after relationship.

Conclusion

Through looking at an extended extract from one interview, I have argued that women who are on their own have to do rhetorical work in presenting their self-narrative in order to deal with a dominant cultural storyline of marital and family relationships that leads progressively to a valued end-point. The extract I have used brings together a use of three frames that were also drawn on either separately or together by other participants in my study. These frames worked well together and separately and could lead to a narrative that was progressive in its overall structure.

The use of a life cycle frame naturalises the account in a way that has an apparent logic to it. It provides some distance and perspective for the speaker so that emotional experiences can be presented relatively dispassionately in the retelling. It both draws on a dominant cultural storyline that participants may want to position themselves against and provides a resource that participants can shape to their own ends. A life events frame provides a justification for speakers for their deviations from the dominant narrative. Framing life as progress through a psychological story of self-improvement allows women on their own to avoid negative subject positions of powerlessness in relationships and of failure to establish a central and continuing intimate relationship. These frames may not appear to offer strong resistance to dominant assumptions about marriage, partnership and family life. Yet the identification of such variations in framing can encourage the listener or reader to 'begin to question dominant frames' (Harris *et al.*, 2001), and allow for the possibility of other stories to be told.

CHAPTER 6

Choice and chance in relationships: negotiating agency

[...] and when the single woman becomes consciously aware of her position she is able to draw upon many justifications or rationalizations. She may tell society that she had to care for an invalid father; that she wanted a career rather than marriage; that she had to give up the man she really loved because of this or that, usually on religious grounds, or even that she preferred sexual freedom outside marriage; or that her mother had such a terrible time in marriage that she decided never to marry; or that she was never able to be sufficiently forward to hunt men, or – the commonest one – “The right man never came along”; and so on endlessly.

(Smith, 1952, p. 115)

Introduction

This chapter looks at the different ways that participants represented themselves as with or without agency in regard to relationships and the constructions of relationships with men that emerged in their self-narratives. In Chapter 5 I showed how one participant drew on different frames in presenting her self-narrative. It was not unusual for a participant to draw on one or more of these frames of a life cycle that followed stages, life events that threw her life off course or to present aspects of her life that showed learning, development and progress. However, not all participants did this. What the self-narratives in the main had in common was an orientation to a dominant cultural storyline and trajectory of happy-ever-after marriage and the advent of children. The challenge for a woman who is alone is to find positive resources that help her to account for why she has deviated from this storyline, while maintaining an image of self-worth.

Chapter 4 ended with some important issues that this chapter now takes up. There is dilemma for a woman alone of how to feel good about herself and have an empowered self-image within an unequal marketplace of intimate relationships in a patriarchal context, and the chapter explores how this was managed by participants. There are two further research questions that this chapter aims to address. What kind of regularity or variability is there in depictions of agency and choice in relationships? How do questions of choice impact on the ways relationships between women and men are constructed in participants' self-narratives? A question that the empirical literature has attempted to explore is whether women have chosen to be single. I approach 'choice' not as a factual

issue but as part of the discursive resources available to single women. In this chapter I will look at the implications of such resources for identity work as a single woman.

I first consider how the theme of 'choice' is addressed in the empirical literature on singleness, and indicate how my own approach differs. In the following sections I present data that draw on different interpretative repertoires for thinking about relationships, and show how my participants used 'choice', as well as an additional resource of 'chance'.

Finally, I present some patterns in how participants gave more detailed stories of relationships with men.

Single by choice?

Chapter 1 referred to some of the different ways that 'choosing' to be single has been considered in the empirical literature on singleness, and the limitations of such discussions. For instance, one line of discussion has been of singleness as a category containing the binaries of stable or temporary on the one hand and of voluntary or involuntary on the other (Stein, 1981b; Gordon, 1994). Such discussions see singleness as a clearly discernible entity, with valid and unchanging distinctions between how people come to be members. My own data suggest much more fluidity around membership of the category, and variability within individual responses to such membership.

Another line of discussion is of choices not to accept offers of marriage (Peterson, 1981) with the implication that women have to wait to be asked, and have very limited agency in these matters. Instead of focusing on whether women have 'really' made choices about singleness, and what kinds of singleness they have chosen, I look at 'choice' as a flexible resource that my participants used and worked with to position themselves in different ways according to the context of our discussion. Representations of women as having to wait to be chosen by a man are part of the commonly understood deficit repertoire of singleness, which continued to be drawn on, and at times countered, in participants' self-narratives.

A recent focus of analysis has been ambivalence among single women over their state

(Gordon, 1994; Lewis and Moon, 1997; Lewis, 2000). In Lewis and Moon's study (1997), responses to a question 'Are you single by choice?' were fairly evenly divided between 'yes' and 'no'. However, almost identical comments from women on their questionnaires amplified these different responses: "Yes, I am single by choice because I have not met anyone I want to marry." "No, I am not single by choice because I have not yet met anyone I want to marry." (Lewis and Moon, 1997, p. 125). Lewis and Moon are concerned with the need for therapists to be sensitive to ambivalence in single women and to help in its resolution. An agenda for therapists is not my concern, and in contrast, I regard these contradictory explanations as providing a useful insight into how women can work with the different meanings of 'choice'. Ambivalence is embedded in cultural representations of singleness, and it is at this level that it needs consideration. Rather than think about choosing to be single as some internal process, a fact to be discovered about the self, I consider choosing or not choosing, and thereby taking responsibility or not for a choice as an *act* (see Harré, 1995). It is an act that we might expect to be performed in people's accounts and narratives, where they may position themselves in contrasting ways according to the situational context.

The dance of choice and chance

In my data, a number of interpretative repertoires for thinking about intimate relationships were drawn upon with some regularity by participants, and I will look at four of these and show how they appeared in the data. 'Choice' was used as a very flexible resource in these repertoires, which enabled participants to position themselves in different ways. The other resource that recurred quite frequently was the notion of 'chance'. What I found was that these were both ways of dealing with the dilemma of presenting oneself as having some agency. Each repertoire solved some problems for the speaker in the context of the immediate discussion, yet presented her with other quandaries. Speakers moved between different subject positions implied by repertoires they drew upon. The movement resembled a kind of dance as they chose another position to avoid the trouble thrown up by the last one occupied.

'I want to feel chosen'

The deficit repertoire of singleness that I discussed in Chapter 4, and characterised as a personal failure to get or hold onto a man, was more usually evoked as one of the images of singleness that relates to others, rather than the speaker. However, there are examples in my data where participants drew on the deficit repertoire to talk about themselves and choice. In Extract 1, Lyn, in her early 50s and unmarried, talks of an assumption that the man has to choose her.

Extract 1

1	Lyn	[...] I think I'd lost my faith and another
2		assumption that I grew up with, and that I
3		found really hard to shake is the idea
4		that the man has to choose me and I can't
5		choose him; he has to tell me that I'm the
6		one he wants and then I can say yes or no
7		to that. And I think I'm still influenced
8		by that idea; I don't have the confidence
9		to think - oh if that's the man I want I
10		can go and get him. I've never had the
11		confidence and I'm aware that some women
12		do have it. But it was very much the idea
13		of a one way pursuit and that the man
14		somehow had to observe in me something
15		which he wanted and then I was either
16		available or not available. [...]

In Extract 2 Milly, who is in her early 30s and also unmarried, talks of marriage and being chosen.

Extract 2

1	Milly	Yes, I'm the sort of woman who, you know,
2		if there was a man I liked and I knew he
3		was free, I wouldn't hesitate to ask him
4		out for a drink, you know, if we were
5		getting on really well and I thought it
6		might be a good idea; I wouldn't just wait
7		for him to ask me. But when it comes to
8		marriage, I don't know, there's something
9		ritualistic about it.
10	Jill	Oh right.
11	Milly	You have to wait to be chosen.
12	Jill	Yes, because there are a number of steps
13		aren't there, between going out for a
14		drink and thinking of marriage?
15	Milly	Oh yes.
16	Jill	But you think even when a lot of those
17		have been gone through and it was pretty
18		obvious to both of you that this was

- 19 something pretty solid, you don't think
 20 you'd be the one to say, what about it?
 21 Milly Yeah, I would still wait for him because I
 22 want to feel chosen. Yeah, it's
 23 definitely that.

In Extract 1, Lyn's notion of the man doing the choosing restricts her own choice to accepting or rejecting him. She recognises that this is a traditional idea that she is holding onto (line 3 'found really hard to shake'), and that there may be other women who would be more active ('I can go and get him', lines 9–10). She positions herself as dependent on male approbation.

Milly combines different positionings of herself in this extract. First, she depicts herself as an active modern woman, someone direct and outgoing, able to take the initiative in getting to know a man. But in relation to marriage, she says 'you have to wait to be chosen'. The position taken here is passive, the woman becomes a 'Cinderella' passively awaiting the man's choice to marry her. She develops this theme to apply more to herself and her own desires and comes to a firmer statement in lines 21 to 22, that she herself *wants* to feel chosen. This young woman, who describes herself as a feminist, is drawing on the interpretative repertoire of singleness as deficit. At first glance she appears to be using it in the classic way – women have to wait to be chosen by a man. Only this will validate them as women who have succeeded in the relationships business. However, Milly's choice of 'want' in line 22 gives a different twist to this repertoire. By framing her statement that she *wants* to feel chosen, she becomes less passive. To 'want' conveys that this itself is a choice she has made, emphasising her own version of femininity in a positive way.

In both these extracts, the speakers are orienting to a dominant heteronormative cultural storyline, or narrative, of men as the ones who choose, and women as those who wait to be chosen. They also both recognise that women 'can go and get' the man in the first place, Milly positioning herself as capable while Lyn positions herself as incapable of such initiatives. The storyline of women waiting to be chosen has a long tradition, while that of women who 'go and get' in a direct way is more recent. Nevertheless, the positions taken

up by both these speakers seem to leave them with very little agency over forming lasting relationships with men.

Drawing on this repertoire of singleness places speakers in a troubled position. They have little control over their prospects of marriage, and possibly even partnership more generally. There are few ways out. If it's the men who do the choosing in marriage, and perhaps in all relationships, then to be unmarried and without a key relationship links a woman with 'singleness as deficit'. Not surprisingly, speakers also drew on alternative repertoires that countered this positioning.

'I haven't felt the need'

If a woman has remained single or returned to singleness, one way of countering an anticipated disappointment with her lot is to say that marriage, or even partnership, was not what she really wanted. Extracts 3 and 4 are examples of this.

Extract 3

- | | | |
|----|-------|--|
| 1 | Jill | Well in the context of that, women often |
| 2 | | find it quite hard to say whether they |
| 3 | | think they've chosen to be single and |
| 4 | | perhaps most don't think they have and yet |
| 5 | | when it comes down to it there are, I |
| 6 | | mean, do you see choices in what you've |
| 7 | | just been describing? |
| 8 | Milly | Yes, I mean when I think about it, if I |
| 9 | | had really, really wanted to get married |
| 10 | | then I would have done I'm sure. I think |
| 11 | | it's just been that I haven't wanted to |
| 12 | | that much. You know, I've been happy |
| 13 | | living with someone or being on my own. I |
| 14 | | haven't felt the need and part of that is |
| 15 | | driven I suspect because I don't, I'm not |
| 16 | | desperate to have children. I mean I'm |
| 17 | | not ruling out the possibility that I |
| 18 | | might one day have a child but, you know, |
| 19 | | I haven't got that much time left and when |
| 20 | | you sort of get to 33 and you've had no |
| 21 | | overwhelming maternal instincts, I'm just |
| 22 | | not that bothered! I think quite often |
| 23 | | it's wanting children that makes a woman |
| 24 | | look for marriage and, you know, that |
| 25 | | hasn't been a driving factor for me at |
| 26 | | all. So, you know, I've not been that |
| 27 | | bothered about it really. I'm sure though |
| 28 | | that if I really, really wanted to, then I |
| 29 | | could and I would have done by now. |

In Extract 4 Lucy, married and divorced in her twenties, and now in her late forties, also

responds to a question about the extent to which she has made choices.

Extract 4

1	Lucy	I think I have, I'm not always the sort of
2		person perhaps, rightly or wrongly I don't
3		always think things through consciously,
4		um, but I do believe that if I'd wanted to
5		be married, if I'd wanted to remarry I
6		would have done. You know, I don't think
7		there's anything about me that would make
8		that, impossible (ha).

In this repertoire the speakers draw on 'choice' differently. Instead of being the man's choice, for which they might still be waiting, it becomes a choice that they have already made, because if they had *really* wanted to be married they would have done so by now.

In Extract 3, Milly represents herself as having made a choice, and capable of having chosen otherwise had she wished. Jill's question draws attention to the possibility of agency, suggesting that Milly might see that she has made some choices. Milly is swift to take up the position of active agent that she has been offered. She uses 'when I think about it', in line 8, as a bridge to cross the contradiction of the passive position she had previously inhabited, wanting to be chosen for marriage, and her positioning here as someone who *could* have chosen to get married. While 'I want to feel chosen' is a recognisable and acceptable state for a young woman, 'not having been chosen' and without agency in the matter seems to be a troubled subject position. The data suggest it is more comfortable to assign oneself some responsibility in having *chosen* not to get married. In explaining her choice, Milly draws on another membership category, as a woman who has not had a child. Marriage is seen as distinctive in having a purpose mainly for those who want to have children. The alternatives to marriage, presented in line 13 are 'living with someone or being on my own', and referring to both experiences does important work for Milly in positioning her as someone with options, both of which she finds fulfilling, rather than as someone who has been overlooked by potential marriage partners. With some rhetorical work in regard to having children, Milly defends herself from a potentially troubled position by saying she is 'not desperate', line 16 and 'not that bothered' lines 22 and 27. However, drawing on this repertoire may create a differently

troubled position.

In both extracts the choice is represented as not a conscious decision, but one that was open to the speaker and that was implicit. Lucy, in Extract 4, positions herself as 'marriageable' and potentially attractive and loveable, and rebuts a deficit repertoire and the troubled position attached to not having been chosen. Yet both speakers use an unusual turn of phrase, which can be summarised as 'if I'd wanted to ... I would have done'. This way of speaking renders them apparently unsure about whether they really made a choice, instead speculating on their motivation. They appear to divine their own intention and the implicit choice they made. Rather than saying in a straightforward way that they were never felt the need for marriage, they 'discover' this. The self is turned into an object for interrogation and becomes mysterious to the speaker. Thus, in arguing that they did have agency and have made a choice, they are at the same time distanced from full agency, since their choice was not made knowingly.

Accounting for not marrying through a story of indifference to the enterprise might appear to be work that only heterosexual women feel required to do. However, Extracts 5 and 6 suggest that women who identify as lesbian or who have had relationships with other women can also draw on a repertoire of 'I haven't felt the need', although in these extracts it is inflected differently.

Extract 5

1	Maggie	[...] I don't think I've had a very strong
2		urge to go into a very close, you know
3		emotional and sexual partnership with
4		another person, the drive to do that
5		doesn't seem to be very strong in me,
6		while there's things that being in a
7		partnership I would really like, and would
8		love the companionship and to have
9		somebody who thought I was okay no matter
10		what, so to have some kind of family
11		background, and not sort of have to work
12		at defining everything all the time, a lot
13		of those things are not necessarily things
14		that are provided by having a live-in one-
15		to-one relationship they're all things
16		that can be got from something else, so I
17		don't know about that really.

Extract 6

- 1 Sue I see myself as always having lived my
 2 life alone with romantic attachments along
 3 the way and I've never, I mean I've never,
 4 um, bought a house with anybody or, um,
 5 yeah, I've never become that kind of
 6 knitted in with somebody really.
- 7 Jill Yes. And so how do you make sense of
 8 that? Do you feel that's a choice that
 9 you've made or do you think?
- 10 Sue Um, well I suppose (.) I feel as if I've
 11 had a slow start because of, um, (.) I
 12 feel I've had a slow start in a way
 13 because of my sexual orientation and my
 14 sort of, um (.) difficulties I suppose in
 15 coming to terms with that really, or, yeah
 16 (.) yes. And also I feel that, um, it's
 17 taken me until (.) I don't know how to put
 18 it really cos it's taken my a long time to
 19 sort of even have a sense of, a positive
 20 sense of being with somebody and how that
 21 could be good and how I want to
 22 communicate and how I want to be (.) and
 23 to sort of enjoy intimacy in a sort of
 24 wider sense of the word and I'm not
 25 actually sure that you have to be in (.) I
 26 mean I don't think you have to be
 27 necessarily in a partnership to experience
 28 that really either.

In these extracts the speakers are accounting not for *never having married*, but for *not having a partner*. As well as drawing on a repertoire of 'I haven't felt the need' the speakers are also drawing on the notion that intimacy and being the primary character in someone's life do not have to be the same thing (see also Reilly, 1996). A contrast is set up between living together one-to-one partnerships and other kinds of relationships. These speakers position themselves as independent: not looking to one primary relationship to provide their sense of identity. Support, companionship and even intimacy, 'in the wider sense of the word', can be got by other means. As with Extracts 3 and 4 there is a sense of discovery about needs or the lack of them. Maggie in Extract 5 says 'the drive to do that doesn't seem to be very strong in me' (lines 4 and 5), and Sue in Extract 6 refers to the time it has taken her to have a positive sense of being with somebody (lines 18 to 20). There is some struggle to articulate this counter-proposal to the powerful cultural storyline that being in a committed partnership is the ideal that all aim for. I suggested in

Chapter 1 that women not currently in a committed relationship may measure their approach to relationships against what they assume to be a normal trajectory of one long-term or permanent partnership. Perhaps this sense of what is 'normal' accounts for some diffidence in the tone employed in these extracts.

Assertions of 'I haven't felt the need' work to defend the speaker from appearing unsuccessful at a commonly shared goal. However, the very degree to which this particular goal is shared makes this a hard position to maintain consistently. The speaker may find that through her use of this repertoire she has effectively excluded herself from expressing ordinary wants and desires. These are implications that were hinted at in the discussion in Chapter 4 as to why participants might find it necessary to frame their desire for a relationship as an admission. Too strong a reliance on a repertoire of 'I haven't felt the need' can place the speaker in a more troubled subject position, for instance as asexual spinster. In the main participants moved quite quickly to draw on contradictory repertoires and a different positioning. For instance, Jill suggests to Sue that perhaps there is an incorrect assumption that long-term partnerships are what everybody would want, and that instead it should be recognised that some may be less suited to this. Extract 7 shows Sue's response.

Extract 7

- | | | |
|----|------|---|
| 1 | Sue | Mm, yes, I feel quite, um (.) well I think |
| 2 | | that's quite a difficult area because I do |
| 3 | | think that, you know, that is a generally |
| 4 | | accepted notion and it is difficult to |
| 5 | | step outside of it because um people (.) I |
| 6 | | mean at one point I had this idea, |
| 7 | | suddenly, that maybe I have some sort of |
| 8 | | support group for single women but it |
| 9 | | wasn't along the lines of kind of 'victim' |
| 10 | | it was about, sort of, more about |
| 11 | | celebrating really and then I was put off |
| 12 | | when I mentioned it to one or two women |
| 13 | | and the response was 'well I want to be in |
| 14 | | a relationship' you know? |
| 15 | Jill | Not get together with a lot of sad women! |
| 16 | | (.) |
| 17 | Sue | Yes, yes (.) I mean it's hard to (.) and |
| 18 | | people tend, people sort of think that, |
| 19 | | um, well you know you're just saying that |
| 20 | | or you would <u>really</u> like, you know, really |

21

what you want isn't it?

In Extract 7, lines 1 to 5, Sue appears to disassociate herself from her previous bold statement of living her life 'alone with romantic attachments along the way' (in Extract 6, lines 1–2). She argues that it is difficult to step outside of the generally accepted notion of partnership as the goal, and that when she has tried to persuade others to celebrate singleness with her they refer to this normative expectation and she invokes their voices as suggesting she is 'just saying that'. The repertoire of 'I haven't felt the need' does some useful work for women in defending them from apparent failure at marriage or the relationships game, since they can argue that they have chosen not to pursue these goals. However, holding on to a position of lack of interest in a partnership brings with it other quandaries such as then appearing to be eccentric, or the potential for accusations of insincerity.

'I want to be in a relationship'

The repertoire 'I want to be in a relationship' was almost always taken up in contradiction to a previous positioning, or in amplification of what had been said earlier. Sometimes it followed an assertion of 'I haven't felt the need'. As I noted in Chapter 4 it was difficult for participants to present the desire for a relationship in a straightforward way. Extracts 8 and 9 illuminate this further by showing how participants moved between other positions and this one, in a dance-like movement.

Extract 8

1	Rachel	[...] Somebody said to me the other day when
2		I was moaning on about being on my own,
3		they said 'you're good at relationships';
4		um, and I think, I think I probably am. I
5		think I'm good at them and I like them and
6		(.) when they're going well of course, and
7		I think, yeah, it's something that I hope
8		for much more than saying I hope for (.)
9		becoming more comfortable with being
10		single, which would be another way, you
11		know, I could be saying well I, you know,
12		hope I get my act together on that and
13		just stop whining about it; and I don't
14		think I whine particularly, um, but, no, I
15		still seem to be, still seem to have slid
16		back into this image of what I want is a

- 17 close, intimate relationship.
- Extract 9*
- | | | |
|----|-------|--|
| 4 | Jill | [...]Do you feel that you're actively |
| 5 | | looking now for a long-term relationship, |
| 6 | | possibly? |
| 7 | Milly | Yes I think I am really. I've never been |
| 8 | | the party animal type; I've never been the |
| 9 | | one to want lots of dates. You know, I |
| 10 | | tend to be a one man woman I suppose and |
| 11 | | while it was never a big issue when I was |
| 12 | | younger, now I do appreciate the |
| 13 | | companionship side of things; I value that |
| 14 | | far more highly than perhaps I did before |
| 15 | | and I want someone to belong to and |
| 16 | | someone to belong to me, and I suppose, if |
| 17 | | I'm honest, yes I'm looking for a husband. |

Rachel, in Extract 8, is responding to a question from Jill about her hopes for the future. Her tone is apologetic. She sets up a contrast between her hopes for a relationship and the possibility of becoming more comfortable with being single. In lines 15 and 16 she depicts her move as having 'slid back into this image' of wanting a close, intimate relationship. Extract 9 is a shorter reproduction of one discussed in Chapter 4 (Extract 17). In an apparent contradiction of her other self-positionings shown earlier in this chapter (Extracts 2 and 3), Milly here presents her search for a husband and hope to get married as a 'confession', a 'truth' that lies behind the rhetoric of choice and independence. The apologetic tone of both speakers may be occasioned by the context of the interview with Jill, as well as contradiction with their own previous subject positions of an independent woman. Rachel, and to a lesser extent Milly, appear to be positioning Jill as someone who believes in the repertoires of independence and achievement for single women. It is not an unreasonable assumption to expect a person who is doing research on women alone to be interested in a positive image for singleness. Yet in relation to the dilemma of feeling good about oneself in an unequal marketplace of intimate relationships, this repertoire of wanting a relationship does not work that well. This is also why it is drawn on apologetically. As noted earlier, it is difficult to express positive feelings about being single alongside the desire for a relationship.

The repertoire of wanting to be in a relationship can make use of the resource of choice. On one level the speaker performs choice by stating her wish for a relationship. However, just wanting is not a key to making sure that it happens, and the more agency a person assigns herself, the more she is at risk of failure. Wanting a relationship was usually presented as a current desire, and therefore there could be as yet no outcome. When participants spoke of earlier points in their lives and their disappointed hopes and expectations of meeting someone for a lasting relationship they were more likely to emphasise the part played by the other major resource they used, that of 'chance'.

'It just hasn't happened'

The repertoire that 'it just hasn't happened' was used as a more measured piece of accounting that emphasises chance and contingency rather than choice in relation to the shape of the self-narrative and relationships to date. Extracts 10 and 11 are examples.

Extract 10

- | | | |
|----|-------|--|
| 1 | Jill | Yes. Have you found any answers that you |
| 2 | | feel good about when people say 'how come |
| 3 | | you're not married?' |
| 4 | Sarah | Um (.) I think I feel much more |
| 5 | | comfortable about it now. Um (.) I mean |
| 6 | | what I tend to say if it does happen now, |
| 7 | | I just say 'well some things just don't |
| 8 | | happen really. It's a bit like having |
| 9 | | kids' I suppose I would say that about |
| 10 | | more than anything because probably if I |
| 11 | | have a sadness it's to do with not having |
| 12 | | children so I feel quite comfy these days |
| 13 | | about saying, well you know that's |
| 14 | | something I would have liked but it |
| 15 | | doesn't happen, and the compensations for |
| 16 | | not having them. |
| 29 | Jill | So you'd say it along the same sort of |
| 30 | | lines would you about - it just hasn't |
| 31 | | happened - in terms of a partner? A |
| 32 | | committed long-term one? |
| 33 | Sarah | Yes, I mean I think in terms of, you know, |
| 34 | | for one reason or another it just hasn't |
| 35 | | happened and, er, I feel quite comfy with |
| 36 | | that really, because that for me says I |
| 37 | | have made choices. You know it hasn't |
| 38 | | just been that I've been a victim to other |
| 39 | | people's decisions. Yeah. |

Extract 11

- | | | |
|----|-------|--|
| 1 | Jill | Someone else I was talking to was saying |
| 2 | | how she felt about, I forget quite how she |
| 3 | | said it but it was about 'not being |
| 4 | | chosen' and that even though she would see |
| 5 | | herself as a feminist, independent, and so |
| 6 | | on, that something about marriage is about |
| 7 | | the man choosing the woman still. Is that |
| 8 | | what people mean when they say 'how come |
| 9 | | you're not married?' |
| 10 | Polly | I think so. You see I would definitely |
| 11 | | not say I was a feminist and I'd hate to |
| 12 | | be put into that category. I mean |
| 13 | | occasionally if I'm asked why I'm not |
| 14 | | married I say 'it's lack of co-ordination; |
| 15 | | that either I loved or I was loved but I |
| 16 | | never managed to co-ordinate the two', and |
| 17 | | I think that would be the ultimate |
| 18 | | honesty; that I've never managed to get it |
| 19 | | quite right; either I've been adored or |
| 20 | | I've adored. |

In Extract 10, Jill's initial question clearly requires a positive response. Sarah is given an opportunity to present an untroubled identity, and it is hard to imagine how she could decline it. The proper thing to do when asked to suggest 'answers that you feel good about' is to present a positive example. The approach in drawing on this repertoire 'It just didn't happen' is to present chance and contingency as driving events. The desire for marriage or a long-term relationship is not played down, but there is a resigned and stoical acceptance that this has not taken place.

Sarah is also able to draw on a sense of agency in Extract 10. She rehearses projected future speech events, adding that it 'says I have made choices' (lines 36 and 37). It is not clear quite how she makes this connection. There is some reflexive work as she does her own discourse analysis of cultural resources! Sarah may be referring to earlier parts of her self-narrative when she described ending an unsatisfactory relationship. Alternatively, she may be seeing the neutral tone of 'it just hasn't happened' as the reverse of having been rejected by others. If this is the argument, then in the process of it not happening, she depicts herself as having made choices not to marry unsuitable partners, rather in the manner of Lewis and Moon's (1997) respondents.

In Extract 11 Polly also assigns herself some agency, having described a more neutral 'lack

of co-ordination' (line 14), she goes on to say that she 'never managed' to co-ordinate and to 'get it quite right' (lines 18 and 19). These later phrases imply the taking of responsibility for a degree of personal failure. If you don't manage something the notion is left hanging that 'managing' was what you were supposed to do.

The matter of agency is a key quandary in relation to this repertoire. In general, if things just don't happen, there should be no blame to deal with. Things not happening cannot be your fault. Yet things not happening can also leave the speaker a victim of circumstance, carried along by fate. This is a less positive position to take up which may explain why in both extracts the speakers claim some agency. Portraying questions of partnership and marriage as matters of chance allows a person to provide a measured account of decisions and events. It can also make them appear less powerful, less in control of their lives than they might wish. Potentially they continue to be personally accountable through some failure of the self for why it did not happen to them.

Changing positions in the dance of choice and chance

Participants drew on older discourses of women waiting for a man, while also working with newer resources. These different repertoires offer a variety of possibilities for dealing with the dilemma of presenting oneself as having some agency, power and control.

Participants represented themselves as having made a *choice* – the one relationship hadn't been their goal, so they hadn't failed to achieve it, it just wasn't that important. Nobody said that they really didn't want a close relationship at all, but there were a number of ways of downgrading the importance of a loving partnership or marriage as the central focus of life. In contrast, when participants represented themselves as 'wanting a relationship' they had to deal with the risk of failure as well as how this want might be construed as in some way not being independent enough to be happy and content to be single. So some kind of apology was often offered alongside the goal of a close relationship.

How should the apparently contradictory statements from Milly in Extracts 1, 3 and 9 be understood? According to some approaches to analysis such statements demonstrate

Milly's ambivalence (see for instance Lewis and Moon, 1997). She has represented herself in turn as capable of asking a man out, as wanting to wait for a man to make the choice in relation to marriage, as already having chosen not to marry, and ultimately as wanting to marry. Each contradictory positioning has been put with the appearance of conviction. However, rather than understanding this as ambivalence on the part of the individual, we need to consider the social context for singleness, and the ideological dilemmas with which women are faced. As I have argued in Chapter 4, the polarised repertoires of singleness as denigration and independence make it difficult for women to express a wish for a committed relationship while at the same time expressing satisfaction with their single state. The notion of 'choice' in relation to enduring relationships or marriage offers single women a very flexible resource in their situated and ongoing conversational acts, which can include the act of taking responsibility as well as a more passive, negative set of choices, and can still allow for other desires.

When participants drew on resources that emphasised *chance* they attributed far less agency to themselves or to others in their lives. It was just the way that things fell out, simply bad timing, not meeting the right person at the time when they were ready for each other. While this resource could absolve her of responsibility for not having found a partner, it did not allow the speaker to give an account that portrayed her as strong and in charge of the direction of her life. Each of the repertoires solves some problems for participants in offering an account of how they come to be single – however, given the current ideological climate, they also bring other quandaries, which is why participants move between different approaches. Dealing with the dilemma of representing oneself as a powerful woman with agency and control in her intimate relationships involved participants in a complicated dance as they drew on different repertoires and took up contrasting positions to help them with this task.

In the next sections I look at how these issues of choice and chance were woven into participants' more detailed stories of relationships, as well as the constructions of men that emerge.

Patterns in the telling of intimate relationships

Issues of 'choice' and 'chance' were also woven into participants' more detailed narratives of past relationships.

'Got it wrong'

The next set of extracts give examples of narratives of past relationships where participants constructed some men as disappointing, or at times, dangerous. However, the dominant pattern in all these narratives was that the speaker herself had 'got it wrong'.

Extract 12

1	Pauline	So after that I had three important, no I
2		had two important male relationships after
3		that, shortly after that I began living
4		with a West Indian man, about three and a
5		half years that went on but that ended,
6		when he became violent, he tried to kill
7		me one night so he had to go. And then
8		after that I took up with a bloke a white
9		man who had just come back from the West
10		Indies so he had that West Indian culture
11		in common, and that lasted about a year
12		and then he, I mean it's so classic, I
13		mean these things are so classic it's
14		almost embarrassing to say it, that we
15		tried to have an equal relationship and
16		this is now the mid 70's where men should
17		do the house work bla bla bla but it's all
18		new, it wasn't accepted, I see accepted
19		now in the world around me. If I'd said
20		would you Hoover the floor he'd say yes
21		but he would never notice it needed
22		hoovering in his own time so the classic
23		thing was it was his turn to cook, I came
24		home from work and he'd gone. A note on
25		the kitchen table job, planned it for
26		weeks, couldn't find out where he went,
27		took me a couple of weeks to find out
28		where he'd gone to, so once again my
29		judgement had been questioned, I should
30		have recognised that he couldn't, that he
31		was spineless I should have recognised
32		that the first one was violent, my self-
33		confidence absolutely got flattened and I
34		think it took me a long time to recover
35		from that. Or maybe you don't recover you
36		just assimilate, don't you?

Extract 13

1	Jill	Yes, so would you say that's something
---	------	--

2 you're actively seeking or working
 3 towards? The notion that you might, with
 4 this chap or with another, be able to
 5 establish an intimate relationship?

6 Val Well, no, it's not that I'm actively
 7 seeking that; I think at the moment, after
 8 the last one ended, with the guy, this was
 9 when I came back from [place]; we finally
 10 got round to living together and within 8
 11 weeks he'd tried to kill me. I mean he
 12 was a psychopath; it was truly awful.
 13 Since then, which completely threw me, I
 14 thought, you know, my choices, how am I
 15 ever going to trust my feelings again,
 16 ever? This was absolutely terrible. I
 17 always thought I was in charge of my
 18 feelings, you know? Got it completely
 19 wrong, completely, in a very dangerous way
 20 and so after that, since then, and I think
 21 I'm still reeling from that really,
 22 although that was 2 years ago, I'm still
 23 healing from that; at the moment I don't
 24 feel, I don't, it would be nice to think
 25 there would be some time in the future
 26 when I could look at someone and say 'yes
 27 I really love you, I want to live with you
 28 forever' but at the moment I don't feel
 29 capable of saying that because I've said
 30 it before and it was the wrong, it was
 31 wrong. And I don't know what was driving
 32 me to say that at the time and that's what
 33 I'm learning at the moment. So if the
 34 chance arises, maybe with this guy or
 35 maybe with somebody else, it would be nice
 36 to think that I could honestly say yes.
 37 But that's a bit different from actively
 38 seeking it. If the opportunity doesn't
 39 arise then, um, then I'm quite happy like
 40 this.

Extract 14

1 Jay [...]

2 But then there was in the last
 3 relationship which lasted for just over
 4 three years and ended three and a half
 5 years ago, that was interesting actually
 6 because there had been quite a long gap in
 7 between my, the end of my last
 8 relationship and starting a new one and at
 9 that point I was in my sort of mid to late
 10 40s and I think I was getting a bit
 11 nervous about perhaps this was it, perhaps
 12 you know I was never ever going to meet
 13 anybody, so I put an advert in The
 14 Guardian and actively sought to end my
 15 single status, which I did. Erm

15 Jill It worked. Yes.

16 Jay And it worked, it worked, it was very

17 successful I thought, till completely like
 18 a bolt out of the blue he ended it. Erm
 19 and I found out a lot of things about him,
 20 or how he dealt with me, anyway I mean did
 21 not know about his past or anything how he
 22 dealt with me that absolutely devastated
 23 me and he just seemed very callous, it was
 24 very upsetting. Erm so that was as I said
 25 about three and a half years ago. Erm, and
 26 I went into deep depression, I really
 27 didn't know what to do with myself and I
 28 did go into counselling a bit erm and I
 29 went on Prozac for a bit and I am
 30 intelligent enough to know that drugs
 31 aren't a, aren't a cure but I needed
 32 something to stop me spending the whole of
 33 my life in tears. It was just a very very
 34 bad time, and I think since that, I mean
 35 that obviously made me think a lot more
 36 about myself and my ability or inability
 37 to have relationships and to understand
 38 what was going on in relationships, and as
 39 I said at the very beginning it made me
 40 very, very cautious, and as I am at the
 41 moment I can't ever imagine making myself
 42 vulnerable enough to want to have another
 43 relationship and so willingly or
 44 unwillingly I am single, unattached, or
 45 you know whatever words you want to put
 46 round it.

In these three extracts men are found wanting in a number of ways. They don't play an equal part in housework, they are spineless, they let you down, they are deceitful and dishonest. In the worst cases (Extracts 12 and 13) they are violent, dangerous and try to kill you. What is striking is that these are not presented as relationships that went wrong somewhere along their process, they are representations of men as deep down faulty and potentially dangerous. Although a range of male failures and dangers are portrayed here, what these accounts have in common is the speaker's representation of herself as having failed to recognise the signs. But why does each speaker end her story by blaming *herself* for lacking judgement, rather than by expressing feelings about the *man's* failure or betrayal?

Edwards has pointed to the social acts that are performed in the ways emotions are talked of, for instance the use of metaphors, or particular ways of describing events can work up behaviour as blameworthy, a temporary state or a continuing disposition, positioning the speaker as more reasonable or justified than others in their narrative (Edwards, 1999).

However, in these extracts the 'emotion discourse' is focused not only on the speaker's reactions to the man's behaviour, but to her reaction to her own lack of judgement. In Extracts 12 and 13 the speaker's failure of judgement is the main focus. So, in Extract 13 'This was absolutely terrible' (line 16) refers to the speaker's lack of control of and inability to trust in her feelings. In Extract 12 'my self-confidence absolutely got flattened' (lines 32–33) refers to her inability to recognise the man who was 'spineless' and the one who was 'violent'.

The work that talk of emotions is doing in these extracts is to represent the speaker as swept off her feet by emotion and as a result unable to use her own judgement.

Participants are telling their own stories, rather than reflecting on men as a category. They focus on the effect on them of men who they portray as difficult. They position themselves as reasonable, as not really contributing to a problematic dynamic, and as a reasonable and sound person they need to account for their own connection to such clearly faulty individuals. Moreover, if women are emphasising their choice, agency and responsibility for the events in their lives then they tend to assign themselves a high level of self-blame when things go wrong. Participants were also often drawing on a 'life as progress' frame that assumes better judgement in maturity and they then felt required to account for an apparent lapse in their self-improvement and control.

Lewis and Moon found that single women in their study both internalised and externalised the reasons for their singleness. While in focus groups they often discussed the mismatch between women who were looking for more emotional responsiveness in men and men who were looking for women 'to take care of them'. However, they would then switch back to identifying what was wrong with themselves as the reasons that men were not interested in them (Lewis and Moon, 1997). The women's own explanation of this contradiction was that if they could identify a problem within themselves they had a goal. They could fix the problem (lose weight, work on intimacy) and then be able to find a partner. However, the caution expressed by the speakers in Extracts 12 to 14 about embarking on another relationship does not accord directly with an explanation that they

were working on the self in order to find a man. Loewenstein attributes the tendency of women towards self-blame to 'The Myth of "Inner Space" Psychology' (Loewenstein, 1983). According to Loewenstein, Inner Space Psychology, involves clinging to the belief that the mainspring of our actions is within ourselves – despite all research evidence to the contrary. The result of such beliefs is that the reasons for misfortunes are also seen as self-induced:

Am I mistaken in thinking that women have been particularly prone to take responsibility for all the misfortunes and betrayals that tend to befall them, joyfully cooperating with mental health professionals in this respect? [...] Women have no monopoly on guilt, shame, and self-blame, and we are perhaps only leading the way when questioning how this entire ideological framework affects our lives. It is easier to accept self-blame than to end up with a condemnation of the entire fabric of our society; it gives us some illusory sense of control over our lives, and it preserves the concept of a just, or at least minimally meaningful, society, an idea without which we might not be able to survive.

(Loewenstein, 1983, p. 531)

Finding the causes for disappointments in life within oneself may make some sense as part of a self-narrative that is concerned with making coherent connections between events. Representing oneself as having choices and agency over how relationships pan out can do important work in positioning a woman as in control of her life and not someone to be pitied. However, it leaves women liable to blame themselves when things go wrong. The emotion discourse of self-blame does not provide speakers with a strong feminist politics of singleness.

'Safe' relationships with unavailable men

Another interesting but problematic way in which participants spoke of men in their lives was as not wholly available to them. Extracts 16 to 18 are examples of this.

Extract 16

1	Lyn	[...] and then into my forties I had very
2		few relationships and two of the most
3		important relationships that I had in my
4		forties were with men who were married to
5		other people and that felt very safe
6		because I didn't want them to leave their
7		wives or anything like that, I simply
8		wanted someone to be looking after me,
9		which they were able to do, and they
10		probably felt free because I wasn't making
11		any demands on them, and I felt I was
12		getting a little of what I deserved, which

13 was to be cared about, and it was safe
14 because they and I didn't have to make any
15 decisions about whether we were going to
16 live together, because we knew we weren't.
17 So that was one experience which I
18 wouldn't, I wouldn't do that again now
19 because I can see it as harmful but at the
20 time it felt to me that it wasn't harmful
21 to anyone and it was positive for me. Um,
22 I never felt that I was doing anything
23 wrong and I still don't see it in that
24 light, even though I wouldn't make the
25 decision to do that same thing again now.
26 I think my reasons would be now if a man
27 wanted a relationship with me then I would
28 want that man to take responsibility for
29 whatever other relationships he already
30 had and to make some responsible
31 decisions, whereas in that time in my life
32 I didn't require that of the men I was
33 with.

Extract 17

1 Jill So at the moment, would, would you
2 describe yourself as having a partner at
3 the moment, or?
4 Lucy I haven't got a partner at the moment, but
5 I'm having an affair at the moment. Which
6 erm, it's been going on for about three
7 years but it's. It is actually the, by far
8 the most, the best relationship I've had
9 with a man but unfortunately we don't live
10 anywhere near each other. So we only
11 actually get together, we probably manage.
12 We manage to get together five or six
13 times a year, but never for more than a
14 couple of days but erm. We build the
15 relationship through letters. We write
16 every fort, every two weeks or so. And
17 also we do a lot of work, a lot of
18 academic work together. And we exchange
19 novels, and we exchange music, so we do
20 have an ongoing strong relationship, but,
21 it's er, unfortunately, well I'm not quite
22 sure how unfortunate it is, but we can't
23 get together very much. In some ways it's
24 difficult, at times, erm, but I must
25 admit, that when we do get together, and
26 have a couple of days together, and it's
27 very good, it's a bit sad to leave, but
28 that's a kind of fairly superficial
29 feeling, and really I'm quite happy to, to
30 get back to my single existence again,
31 till next time we meet. (laughs) I think
32 if I was going to, you know if I was sort
33 of given the option, or, not at all sure
34 that I would want to change.

Extract 18

1	Pauline	And then I had a very, very nice
2		relationship with a Zimbabwean, I've
3		probably had more, maybe an equal number
4		of black partners than white and in London
5		that's possible you see. And this
6		wonderful Zimbabwean he came over here for
7		his education and as his education got
8		going, and then the revolution happened in
9		Zimbabwe and he was off and he's now part
10		of the government over there, so I have
11		these high level friends and sometimes he
12		drops into London and will come and stay
13		here, if he's here for the weekend or his
14		deputation sends him over here, and I do
15		also have a, this sounds awful, I do also
16		have a long standing relationship with an
17		Irishman, who I've known for twenty-five
18		years and he was over here this summer.
19		So I have these long distance
20		relationships, but there's nobody on site.

In Extract 16 married men are represented as 'safe', because the speaker did not want them to leave their wives and no decisions had to be made about whether to live together. The representation of men in this talk is that there is a need to avoid making too many demands of them, and close relationships with men can be more trouble than they are worth. They gave the speaker 'a little of what I deserved'. The speaker distances herself from the subject position of 'the other woman' doing wrong, by placing the events firmly in the past (lines 17 to 21). She asserts a position more on moral high ground for any potential future relationships by arguing that a man with other relationships who wants a relationship with her should take responsibility for his decisions (lines 26 to 31). Interestingly, she does not envisage a scenario where she might be the one who initiated a relationship, or needed to consider the effects of her actions on others.

In Extract 17 the speaker separates out from her 'single existence', the relationship she calls an 'affair': pursued through letters and intellectual exchange and occasional short periods together, this is depicted as strong. However, she repairs her initial portrayal of their distance from each other as unfortunate in lines 21 and 22, and puts a more positive framing on the impossibility of getting together much, referring to her sadness on leaving

as 'a kind of fairly superficial feeling' (lines 28 to 29). Her reference to if she was 'given the option', in expressing uncertainty on whether she would want to change this arrangement, suggests that it may not be entirely in her power to make changes. Indeed, she depicts herself, and to a lesser extent the man involved, as having remarkably little agency in how the relationship is carried on. They 'don't live anywhere near each other' (lines 9 and 10), but there are no apparent thoughts of change so that they can get together more frequently. The subject position is of passive enjoyment of a relationship that does not require her to take action.

Extract 18 also refers to 'distance relationships', and as with Extract 17, it is not stated whether the men concerned are single. There are ethical issues involved in presenting oneself as having an affair with a married man, and work involved in recovering some ethical status. If the men providing 'distance relationships' referred to in Extracts 17 and 18 are committed elsewhere, then these speakers have avoided dealing with any need to regain ethical ground. In Extract 18 the men are even more firmly placed at a considerable distance, and their visits are a bonus rather than events which might bring sadness at partings. The speaker orients to a potentially shocking aspect (Jones, 2002) of her account with her aside 'this sounds awful' (line 15).

A depiction of married men as 'safe' seems to be a reversal of ordinary understandings of relationships. It might be expected that commitment would be seen as desirable in relationships, and associated with feeling safe and secure. For Lyn however, in Extract 16, safety consisted of not having to make decisions about commitment.

Richardson, in her study of 65 single women involved with married men, found that because such relationships were defined as temporary, they were seen by the women concerned as safe (Richardson, 1988). Not one of the women she interviewed had an expectation in the beginning stage of a long term or permanent relationship with her lover. Richardson considers that this expectation of temporariness led to feelings of freedom and safety for the women concerned. She suggests that this and the secrecy of the relationship,

required by the man's marital status, led in time to greater emotional intimacy. However, Richardson argues, that such liaisons proved particularly safe for the men involved, while the secrecy, which meant that the women lacked public acknowledgement of their status, increased women's dependence on the married man's attentions.

Richardson's analysis pays close attention to the importance of secrecy, which she regards as linked with a power imbalance, reinforced by the man's marital status, gender and, often, higher socioeconomic status. She concludes that secrecy protects the interests of the powerful. My participants were not always referring to married men when they talked of relationships with men who were not fully available. What I find to be a common feature of their narratives is the portrayal of the speaker as gaining some control and autonomy in a relationship that is limited through the man's physical distance, emotional availability or personal commitments elsewhere. These are accounts of choice rather than chance.

However, since it appears to be in all cases the man who is withholding availability, these positive accounts, like those of participants in Richardson's study, point at the same time to a power relationship in which it is the man who sets the terms.

A 'five year term of office'

This pattern of telling introduces a 'new realism' about relationships. Relationships with men are depicted as lasting for a period and then no longer meeting needs and so finished.

Extracts 19 to 21 are some examples.

Extract 19

1	Josie	[...]So those two, [name] and [name], are
2		probably two of the most important
3		relationships, and of course, their
4		fathers because you know I had these five
5		year relationships with them, and then
6		when [name] was 9 I met a really nice
7		bloke called [name] and we lived together
8		for five years, another five year term of
9		office, and um, that worked well for a
10		while until I got bored and fed up with it
11		and since then I've been on my own.

Extract 20

1	Ruth	[...] I think it became um a situation where
---	------	--

2 it was hard to see where the next ten
 3 years were going to go and um I don't
 4 really see relationships to be for life,
 5 that's not my view, I think you just, I
 6 think relationships are there for as long
 7 as you both want to be in them and then
 8 when one of you doesn't want to be in it
 9 then there's a problem.

Extract 21

1 Claire [...]
 2 We hadn't got the skills or the
 3 experience I think to talk really, to
 4 communicate, so we just distanced
 5 ourselves from each other to a point
 6 where, well 'what's the point of being
 married?' [...]

In Extract 19, Josie speaks of her important relationships with her sons (lines 1 to 3) and in doing so makes reference to their fathers and one further relationship. Each of these relationships lasted five years. The last one worked well until she was bored with it. Ruth, in Extract 20 talks of her partnership and justifies its ending through the idea of relationships as not for life but 'as long as you both want to be in them' (lines 6 and 7). Claire talks of the ending of her marriage when young.

This pattern speaks of a new realism in how relationships with men are depicted. The relationships are described as having lasted for a period, then they were not meeting needs and so they finished. The pattern was often combined with a life cycle approach of stages and ages as in Claire's description of neither partner having the skills or the experience to communicate. Choice and chance could both be drawn on in explaining the ending of a relationship. This could be represented as a decision, as in Extract 19 when Josie describes herself as bored, or as more the chance unrolling of events, as in Extract 20 where it was 'hard to see where the next ten years were going' (lines 2 and 3) and Extract 21 when they became so distant that there no longer seemed any point in being married (lines 5 to 6). As with the repertoire 'It just didn't happen' there is a resigned acceptance that the relationships ended, and a more neutral tone to the narrative. This is not to argue that the relationships themselves were necessarily less emotional in comparison with any others, simply to note that the pattern of descriptions was to unfold changes in the relationship without invoking the emotions in the telling.

These are not the tales of mourning a lost relationship and complaints of the man's failure to provide emotional intimacy or sense of betrayal from his infidelity that Riessman identified in her research with divorcing women (Riessman, 1990). 'A five year term of office' is a more contemporary theme. The relationships constructed here were valued for a period of time but then become irrelevant and no longer needed. There is some resonance in these stories with Giddens' argument that the 'pure relationship', continued only for as long as it is thought to deliver enough satisfaction for each individual to remain within it, has replaced a concept of 'romantic love' (Giddens, 1992, p. 58). Bauman's notion of revocable relationships is similarly applicable (Bauman, 2003). There appear to be a different set of expectations from relationships in these stories from notions of commitment or the 'have/hold' discourse of monogamy, partnership and family life (Hollway, 1984). For Giddens the pure relationship condition of relating to others in an egalitarian way means autonomy. Yet these stories are inflected with acceptance rather than success. Like the other two patterns I have identified here, they are not entirely happy stories, and the narrators often went on to speak of their longing for closeness, their disappointment at not finding 'the other'.

Conclusion

I have argued that when women on their own narrate the story of their relationships they have to deal with the dilemma of how to have an empowered self-image within an unequal marketplace of intimate relationships in a patriarchal context. As I showed in Chapter 4, the highly polarised constructions of singleness that participants drew on had an impact on the kind of identity work that they did to ward off the unacceptable aspects of singleness and to deal with the apparent contradictions in their expressions of desire for intimacy. The detailed work in this chapter looking at different interpretative repertoires used by participants in giving a self-narrative of intimate relationships adds to this analysis. Alongside an understanding of women as lacking agency, needing to wait for men to make the first move, I found participants responding to the dilemma through doing rhetorical work drawing on repertoires around 'choice' and 'chance' as explanations in

their stories of intimate relationships. However, participants rarely stayed with just one kind of resource in their self-narratives. At times the speaker would appear to be dancing in and around different repertoires, alighting on the subject positions that these afforded her. Each repertoire produced a different quandary for her narrative. The dance-like movement, occasioned by the changing context of the interview talk, would take the speaker away from one quandary, only to draw on a different interpretative repertoire which landed her with a new kind of trouble.

A particular issue for the woman in seeking to represent herself as self-determining and making her own choices with regard to men is in accounting for relationships that have gone seriously wrong. In the self-narratives from my participants there was a strong pattern of work on the self rather than 'the other' following disappointment, dishonesty or even violence from the man. As well as constructions of men as deeply faulty, where participants blamed themselves for their poor judgement and flawed choice, there were other interesting variations in how relationships with men were constructed in the narratives. Men who were in some way unavailable were often portrayed in a positive light for instance providing a little bit of caring, intellectual companionship, or exotically distant and infrequent intimate episodes none of which disturbed the stability and self-determination of the participant's independent life. A further construction of relationships with men was as variable over time – right for a period but dispensable when their time was up.

The empirical literature on singleness has pointed to ambivalence among single women regarding whether they have chosen to be single. In my view, rather than understanding contradictory statements as ambivalence on the part of speakers, they should be considered in relation to the social context for singleness. In a society that holds strongly to a dominant cultural storyline for women's lives the individual who is not able to fit her self-narrative into that storyline has relatively few resources with which to produce a consistent account. Repertoires that stress 'choice' or 'chance' offer some flexible ways that a woman on her own can present herself as having at times some agency in the events of

her life or as swept along by fate or contingency.

CHAPTER 7

The everyday politics of singleness

In the first place, we are all very much influenced by public opinion, and public opinion treats a spinster with a kind of mild disapproval, almost as if she had no right to deface the world with her presence. This is due partly to the fact that she is considered a failure. Despite her achievements in other spheres, she failed to attract or entrap a man into marriage.

(Smith, 1952)

Introduction

My analysis of data has argued that the range of interpretative resources for women alone involves them in trouble of various kinds. Chapter 4 indicated the kind of trouble that the polarised pattern of interpretative repertoires caused participants in this study. Chapter 5 shows the trouble involved in telling a story of life and relationships and dealing with dominant cultural storylines of marriage or long-term partnership and family. In Chapter 6 I focused on participants' trouble in presenting themselves as having made choices and exerting agency rather than fitting into a deficit slot. In my approach to data for this chapter, I want to examine in detail some patterns of troubled interaction in the interview itself, and consider the relationship of interactions in the interview to broader issues of stigma and social exclusion.

Single women face a range of economic and status disadvantages. Chasteen (1991) has argued that single women are located outside traditional expectations of what a woman's place should be. She describes the impact on women strongly:

Single women are in a double bind: they are subjected not only to the economic disadvantages and social subjugation of being a woman, but also to the social and economic drawbacks of being single in a couple-oriented society.

(Chasteen, 1994, p. 311)

Data from US population surveys between 1971 and 1991 shows a decline in economic status of the increasing number of households headed by single women between 35 and 45 years, with black women who had never married most adversely affected (Choi, 1996).

There are many reminders for women who are alone that they are not living a normative lifestyle. The 'courtesy' title of 'Mrs' is often applied to women engaging in health care and commercial encounters without regard to their legal marital status or their preferred form

of address. Social conversations about children or partners may be experienced as excluding by those who have neither. A strong and widespread expectation that marriage is the main place for giving companionship, support and sexual pleasure has been said to render relationships outside marriage thinner and less meaningful (Barrett and McIntosh, 1982; Chandler, 1991; Rosa, 1994). A survey of young single people found that the majority of both men and women saw loneliness and lack of companionship as major disadvantages for the single, while more women than men picked financial insecurity as an important issue (Jamieson *et al.*, 2002). A single woman eating in a restaurant or at a function mainly attended by couples can feel she stands out in some way or is seen as deviant by others (Chasteen, 1994). Supermarket portions are often packaged for two people. Hotel accommodation booked on a holiday package is frequently subject to payment of a 'single supplement'. Travelling alone at home or abroad presents women with additional risks. My research question for this chapter is to explore what a detailed analysis of interaction can show of the workings of the everyday experience of these broader issues of social exclusion.

First I introduce the analytical approach and tools that I use for understanding data in this chapter. I explain some key assumptions and principles of conversation analysis, discussing in particular the contributions of Erving Goffman and Harvey Sacks to the detailed exploration of social interactions. I consider debates over treating data from interviews as examples of social interaction. I then present extracts from my data that show interactions relating to the same topic where participants were asked about whether they had a partner. Finally, I discuss what connections can be made between the evidence of 'trouble' in the interview interactions and other everyday trouble in social interaction for women alone.

Social interaction and conversation analysis

Analytical concepts that I shall be drawing on in this chapter come from the work of Goffman and from conversation analysis. Heritage links the work of Goffman, Garfinkel

and Sacks as central figures in the development of conversation analysis (Heritage, 2001). All had an interest in the detailed scrutiny of social interaction. Goffman established that social interaction is a form of organisation in its own right. He recognised a complex set of interactional rights and obligations linked to 'face' as well as to other more constant aspects of personal identity and to larger social institutions (Heritage, 2001, p. 48). According to Goffman, 'face' is the positive social value that a person claims within a particular interaction, as understood by 'the line that others involved assume' that person to be taking during a particular contact (Goffman, 1955, p. 213). In particular, Goffman contributed the notion, later developed by conversation analysts, that talk-in-interaction is a fundamental social domain that is worthy of study. From Garfinkel came the notion that there are shared practices and procedures through which people produce and recognise talk, and that these practices can be identified and studied. With his colleagues, Schegloff and Jefferson, Sacks absorbed these two perspectives into the new methodology of conversation analysis (CA) (Heritage, 2001).

An important assumption made by conversation analysts is that the practices of conversation can be understood independent of any reference to motivational, psychological or sociological characteristics of individuals. While people may have intentions, motives or interests, CA does not treat their interaction as providing a key to what these may be (Wooffitt, 2001). It is not assumed that what people say reveals what they think. Explanation in terms of agency, intention, prior planning and other mental states is therefore deliberately avoided. Sacks was interested in 'how' conversation practices are accomplished, pointing out that some involved exchanges might appear to involve rapid thought and planning but that this is not the preoccupation of the conversation analyst (Sacks, 1992, Vol 1 p. 11). A further aim is to avoid approaching data with questions led by theory. Participants bring their own endogenous (within the interaction) interpretation to their interactions, and these are revealed in how they respond to their understanding of other participants' contributions. It is important to investigate participants' endogenous interpretations rather than impose a set of

assumptions as analyst (Wooffitt, 2001).

A contribution from Sacks to issues of identity and social organisation involves consideration of the ways in which people manage their description of events. People use categories to store knowledge about society (Sacks, 1992). According to which category a person is assigned by herself or others, there is a rich store of expectations, understandings and links with particular kinds of behaviour. So in the child's story which starts: 'The baby cried. The mommy picked it up', the 'mommy' will be understood by most people to be the mother of the baby, without any need for further explanation of how she comes to be there (Sacks, 1992). Each identity is heard as a category from a set, which Sacks calls a membership categorisation device (MCD). 'Mommy' is heard as a category from the set 'family'. Choosing one category from a set excludes someone being identified with some other category from the same set (Silverman, 1997). Within each set there is a category which can classify any member of the population. However, any one person will have a range of different sets by which they may be classified, so someone who is a mother is also a woman, from the set gender, and might be, for instance, a doctor, from a set concerning occupations. The kind of activities that persons from a particular category are expected to undertake are often 'category bound': crying is 'bound' to baby, in the example of the baby and the mother (Sacks, 1992). Babies cry, and mothers do something about it. On the introduction of the category 'baby', people start looking around for the mother and understand 'the mommy' who picks up the baby as that baby's mother. There is nothing there that needs further explanation – she is just doing what mothers are supposed to do. Heritage (2001) notes three ideas central to the focus in CA on the sequential aspects of interaction:

1. Turns at talk are produced with an orientation to the preceding talk, most commonly the immediately preceding talk.
2. Current actions ordinarily project the relevance of a particular range of next actions to be done by a subsequent speaker.

3. Speakers show, by the production of the next action, their understanding of a prior action at a multiplicity of levels. For instance, in giving an 'acceptance', they show their understanding that the prior turn was possibly complete, that it was addressed to them and that it was an action of a particular type (an invitation).

The approach of sequential analysis looks at how one utterance 'fits' with a prior utterance, and what kind of implications it holds for what should come next (Wooffitt, 2001). One of the observations made by conversation analysts is that there are 'first parts' and 'second parts' to what are termed 'adjacency pairs'. Questions, for instance, are paired with answers, or a reason why an answer cannot be given. Invitations are paired with responses. A view, or assessment, of a situation from one speaker is paired with one or more views from subsequent speakers. However, the ranges of possible 'second parts' are produced in different ways, which are not equivalent.

Conversation analysts use the term 'preference turn shape' to discuss this feature of sequential question and answer structures. The preference turn shape, or preference organisation, does not refer to the personal preferences of the questioner or the other participant. Instead it characterises conversational events in which alternative but non-equivalent courses of action are available to participants (Atkinson and Heritage, 1984a, p. 53). Particular kinds of turns from one speaker, such as invitations or assessments, have been noted to have alternatives of preferred and dispreferred turns following from a second speaker. The preferred turn is, generally speaking, the kind of response that the question expects or invites. Invitations are normatively accepted rather than rejected (Drew, 1984), agreement with some prior speaker's assessment or view on a subject or event is normatively preferred to disagreement, except when the original assessment involved self-deprecation (Pomerantz, 1984). Preferred and dispreferred alternatives are routinely performed in different ways. The preferred activities are normally performed directly and with little delay, while dispreferred activities are usually performed with delay between turns, delays within turns and may be softened or made indirect (Atkinson and Heritage, 1984a).

The approach that I am taking to analysis of data for this chapter is to look in detail at conversational exchanges, for what these can contribute to an understanding of singleness as an identity. The aim here is not to treat participants as direct informants and reporters on the experience of singleness, but to explore how the identity of singleness is used in talk, the talk in question being the interview itself. How do the categories 'single woman' or 'woman alone' work in conversation, what activities are they bound to, and what activities require explanation and accounting work? What kind of preference organisation is evident?

Analytic process

My attention was first drawn to interaction in the interview relating to an area of questioning asking 'do you have a partner?' when I noticed some awkwardness and variation in the way that this question was asked. I collected up a file of the whole corpus that included this question and discussion on this topic and started to look more closely at the similarities and differences. It soon became apparent that I needed to do a more detailed transcription of these exchanges in order to capture nuances of the locally organised and collaboratively produced interaction, for instance, delays in responses, interrupted and overlapping speech, or speed in following on a turn (see Appendix 7 for a list of the transcription conventions used in this chapter). This was quite laborious work, and I was surprised at the extent of simultaneous speech and interjected phrases that had been lost in the initial transcription. The result was a lengthier set of data that I could examine for hesitant or instantaneous speech and note similarities and differences in the ways that the question was asked and responded to.

The interview as a context for talk-in-interaction

The data that I examine is from my interviews. Conversation analysts focus on 'talk-in-interaction' as the object of their enquiry (Schegloff, 1997). It has been suggested that some primacy is given in CA to 'casual talk', since it is seen as the primordial kind of talk from which all other kinds of talk-in-interaction, such as interviews, derive or deviate (Edwards, 1997). Casual talk is talk where there are no obviously asymmetrical or pre-

assigned turns at talking, and where participants are free to choose and change topic. An analytic focus on casual talk can provide the researcher with what is often referred to as 'naturally occurring data'. That is, data recorded without a special event being set up to obtain it (although there is scope for debate on how far the very act of recording for research purposes may affect the data collected).

An interview clearly does contain some asymmetry and prior determination of topic weighted towards the interviewer. However, as I argued in Chapter 3, it is none the less a form of social interaction and in many respects appears like a conversation. Like other more institutional forms of talk, research interviews also draw on everyday understandings of how social interaction is expected to proceed. Widdicombe and Wooffitt remark that it seems highly unlikely that people use a special set of communicative competencies just for interviews, and that if they do orient to talk as 'interview talk' then this should be apparent in the data (Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 1995). The talk-in-interaction of interviews can be expected to show something of everyday practices and understandings of interviews as well as everyday practices more generally.

An interview may, of course, contain casual talk as well as more structured questions and responses. Indeed, it is not easy to distinguish 'casual talk' and 'conversation' from other kinds of talk. Nor is there consensus about what 'other kinds of talk', sometimes called 'institutional talk', might be, and whether analysis of such talk is also the province of CA (Billig, 1999). Billig has pointed to a lack of sharp definition from conversation analysts as to what constitutes a conversation. He argues that the use of this word turns on the rhetoric of 'ordinariness'. He suggests that the vagueness of the term risks building in an assumed distinction between the public and the private world, or the institutional and the domestic, in ways which feminists have sought to criticise (Billig, 1999). If 'conversation' is treated as meaning 'that which deals with the domestic' there may be more asymmetry in everyday conversations (for instance along gender lines, or other perceived differences in power) than the method allows for. Schegloff responds to this criticism with denial that conversation analysts believe that ordinary conversation is egalitarian in nature. He

argues that an understanding of the organisation of turn-taking provides a resource for recognising and inspecting asymmetrical interactions to see how disadvantages are reproduced in conversation (Schegloff, 1999).

If CA is a flexible resource that provides a 'canvas on which the practices end up having painted a picture of inequality, or exclusion, or oppression, or asymmetry without a sense of oppression' (Schegloff, 1999, p. 564) then it should prove a useful tool for analysis of my interview data. I characterised my approach to interviews in this project (in Chapter 3) as to treat myself as a participant to a conversation about experiences of singleness and give more of my own views than might normally be expected from a research interviewer. In effect, the interviews were set up as women-only spaces where different aspects of singleness could be explored in a sympathetic context, with an interviewer who was herself single. Although I consider that my approach to interviewing treated the interview as a conversation, I do not assume that it was a symmetrical conversation or that both participants were equally free to choose the next topic of conversation.

Identity work and questions about a partner

In this section I show some extracts of exchanges that involved questions about a partner, and examine and discuss the patterns suggested.

A direct request for information

Extract 1

- | | | |
|----|-------|---|
| 1 | Jill | Um uh at the moment do d- is there anyone |
| 2 | | that you would describe as a partner? |
| 3 | Polly | =No not at all not recently no |
| 4 | | (2.0) |
| 5 | Jill | Um (2.0) what er (0.5) you said that you |
| 6 | | you hate the term 'spinster' and I just |
| 7 | | sort of wonder if you can kind of think |
| 8 | | about what kind of images (1.5) the whole |
| 9 | | notion of singleness has conjured up for |
| 10 | | you at different times (0.5) what perhaps |
| 11 | | as a child you might have thought about |
| 12 | | being single (.) and as you were growing |
| 13 | | up (.) perhaps as a young person |

Extract 2

- | | | |
|---|------|--|
| 1 | Jill | Mm (2.5) okay (2.0) and um you said you've |
|---|------|--|

- 2 got lots of of friends. W- would you
 3 describe yourself as having a partner at
 4 the moment or (0.5) no?
 5 Mary =No I haven't had a partner for years
 6 (1.5)
 7 Jill °Right° (1.5) okay um well those are just
 8 sort of starting off kind of hhh
 9 lo[cating]
 10 Mary [yeah] yeah
 11 Jill questions and (0.5) you've looked pretty
 12 carefully by the look of it at that
 13 [schedule]
 14 Mary Yeah

Extract 3

- 1 Jill [...] Anyway (0.5) .hh okay and (0.5) at the
 2 moment would you describe yourself as as
 3 having a partner?
 4 Thari No
 5 (1.0)
 6 Jill °Oka:y° (1.0) [and]
 7 Thari [But] you wouldn't be
 8 interviewing me otherwise hh then would
 9 you? [huh] huh

Extract 4

- 1 Josie So I always put single (1.5) but
 2 unattached free yeah independent all of
 3 those things I think are a lot more
 4 positive
 5 Jill Mm (1.0) [yeah]
 6 Josie [than] just sort of (0.5) ticking
 7 yourself as divorced.
 8 Jill Mm (2.0) okay um would you describe
 9 yourself as having a partner at the
 10 moment?
 11 Josie N:o no I wouldn't
 12 Jill °Alright° well pursuing the theme of of
 13 singleness (0.5) and (2.0) I don't know if
 14 you can cast your mind back I'm I'm
 15 interested in what sort of images people
 16 have about single women (0.5) and if you
 17 can think you know what that might have
 18 meant to you as a child or as a teenager
 19 or as a young adult (0.5) can you think of
 20 different sort of meanings that it might
 21 have had?

Extract 5

- 1 Milly [...]I think what I used to say (0.2) um I
 2 mean if I- if I- if it was on a (0.2) form
 3 to fill out I would say single but (0.2)
 4 if someone asked me (0.2)
 5 Jill [mm]

- 6 Milly [was] I married I
 7 would say something like no I'm not
 8 married but I'm living with someone.
- 9 Jill Mm mm
- 10 Milly Huh huh it's kind of a clause on the end
- 11 Jill Yeah yeah
- 12 Milly I was never quite sure how to describe
 13 myself really [clears throat]
- 14 Jill [Yes wo-would] you have
 15 described yourself then as having a
 16 partner?
- 17 Milly (1.0) Mm
- 18 Jill And you might describe him as your
 19 partner?
- 20 Milly =yes
- 21 Jill mm and- and you wouldn't say that at the
 22 moment?
- 23 Milly (0.5) N:o oh no (0.2) no I mean I haven't
 24 (0.2) he hasn't been my partner since the
 25 New Year (0.5) um and in the last few
 26 weeks I've I've been (0.2) going out with
 27 a (0.2) chap who lives in [place] but I
 28 certainly wouldn't call him a partner
 29 either he's (0.2) you know he's a
 30 boyfriend [(0.2)]
- 31 Jill [mm]
- 32 Milly [He's] you know someone I
 33 (0.2) go out with Huh huh huh huh so it's
 34 a (0.2) yeah there seem to be subtle (0.2)
 35 differences.
- 36 Jill °Right [right°]
- 37 Milly [yeah]
- 38 Jill well maybe we'll try and tease out some of
 39 those in a minute
- 40 Milly [yeah]
- 41 Jill [um] but to focus on
 42 singleness first (0.5) um I was interested
 43 in (0.5) wh- wh- how- (0.5) what it's
 44 meant to you (0.2) um at different times
 45 of your life really (0.2) like what have
 46 your images of singleness been perhaps as
 47 a child or as a young (0.2) young girl
 48 woman (0.2)
- 49 Milly [yeah as a (0.2) as a young
 50 teenager]
- 51 Jill [°an and what are your images
 52 now°?]

Extract 6

- 1 Jill So at the moment (0.5) would (0.5) would
 2 you describe yourself as having a partner
 3 at the moment or (0.2) °or no°?
- 4 Lucy I haven't got a partner at the moment but

5 I'm having an affair at the moment.(0.5)
 6 Which erm (0.5) it's been going on for
 7 about three years
 8 Jill Mm
 9 Lucy but it's:s (1.0) it is actually the:e by
 10 far the (1.0) the most uh the best
 11 relationship I've had with a man
 12 Jill Mm
 13 Lucy but hhh unfortunately we don't live
 14 anywhere near each other
 15 Jill [Mm]
 16 Lucy [So] we only actually (0.5) get together
 17 we prob- we manage to get together (0.2)
 18 five or six times a year
 19 Jill mm hm
 20 Lucy but not never for more than (1.0) a couple
 21 of days
 22 Jill Mm

Extract 7

1 Jill I was just wondering what words you'd use
 2 to (1.0)
 3 Alix [describe myself]
 4 Jill [sort of introduce] yourself?
 5 Alix Oh, um (3.5) I think it would depend
 6 partly on my mood sometimes I'd be very
 7 upbeat about it and say (1.0) that I'm
 8 (1.5) what's the phrase young free and
 9 single or whatever um though I'd never use
 10 that phrase actually silly um no I suppose
 11 I might refer to having an ex-husband if
 12 it came up in conversation (0.5) umm (4.0)
 13 I don't know, it's hard 'cause I feel like
 14 I've got a lot of commitments to other
 15 people who have you know family friends um
 16 (1.0) that are really important to me so I
 17 wouldn't say I was sort of available in
 18 (1.0) that sense but I
 19 Jill mm
 20 Alix I suppose I might describe myself as
 21 looking for (1.5) or (2.0) that there's
 22 space in my life for a partner I think I
 23 don't know
 24 Jill Well we can come back to those things
 25 anyway (2.0) um (1.5) oh yeah I suppose
 26 that covers what I was going to .hhh ask
 27 you next huh huh huh I was going to say
 28 would you describe yourself as having a
 29 partner at the moment?
 30 Alix Well that's a ve:ry moot point huh
 31 Jill [huh huh huh]
 32 Alix [if we'd had this interview in erm] end of
 33 January I'd have said no oh well no I
 34 don't know actually (2.0) then I'd have
 35 said no not a partner but I was in I was
 36 having a 'fling' with somebody (1.0) erm

- 37 but no way could that be called a
 38 partnership um and now I don't know
 39 whether I've got a partner or not it'll
 40 have to wait and see till he comes back
 42 from [place] hhh huh
- 43 Jill Right
- 44 Alix umm I sort of feel like I have (2.0) in
 45 that I'm not looking I'm certainly not
 46 looking for anyone else I'm not open to
 47 suggestion (1.0) um (1.0) but it doesn't
 48 feel umm I'm not entirely (1.0) con-
 49 confident that
- 50 Jill Yeah
- 51 Alix it is going to turn into a partnership
- 52 Jill yeah
- 53 Alix because of the history of well (0.5) .hh
 54 what's happened in the past
- 55 Jill mm
- 56 Alix But I certainly feel that there's more
 57 prospect of that happening than any time
 58 in the last three years
- 59 Jill Mm
- 60 Alix And that's what I'd like to see happen
- 61 Jill Mm
- 62 Alix Yeah

Extract 8

- 1 Jill Yeah so so you are single and you (0.5)
 2 always have been (1.0) and and would you
 3 describe yourself as having a partner?
- 4 Grace Ye:s yes I- I have a partner (0.5) but
 5 it's it's a distance (0.5) relationship as
 6 you know (0.5) and so erm (1.0) [name]
 7 lives in [place] and works in [place] and
 8 I live and work in [different place] (0.5)
 9 and erm we have a weekend and holiday
 10 (0.5) relationship I suppose. Well I mean
 11 other people don't like singleness, they
 12 they want to to make people into couples
- 13 Jill mm
- 14 Grace so erm and we do get (0.2) a lot of joint
 15 Christmas cards (0.2) and joint things
 16 (1.0) but I never send them out I don't
 17 send things out from [name] and me,
 18 because I think, they're from me and [he]
 19 Jill [Yes]
- 20 Grace can go and get his own

Although answering a question about whether one has a partner is of a somewhat different order to accepting an invitation, or disagreeing with another speaker's views, there may be some value in thinking about these interactions in preference organisation terms. I suggest that, in the context of these interviews with 'women alone', there is some evidence that a

'no' response is the preferred turn shape to the question 'do you have a partner?'. The first four extracts give 'no' responses with some minimal accounting work or hesitation from the speakers. The responses given in the next four extracts display more of a dispreferred turn shape. There are only two responses that are a 'yes' as such, one of which refers to an earlier relationship in Extract 5, and the other in Extract 8. However, Extracts 5, 6 and 7 contain strongly qualified 'no' responses and all three of these interactions show more detailed accounts with more delays and hesitations than in the first three extracts. This suggests that to answer yes or an equivocal 'no' is a dispreferred turn. The speakers seem to have felt required to give a fuller account and do some alignment work to bring the potentially conflicting categories of 'woman alone' and of 'woman in a relationship' together.

To consider this analysis in more detail, in the first four extracts the participants being interviewed give a clear negative answer to Jill's question. The first two of these involve quite rapid responses following closely on from the end of the question, known as 'contiguous' speech. The question from Jill takes a fairly direct form in these extracts, yet there is some perturbation in her opening to the question, 'do d-', 'W- would' in the first two extracts respectively. There is hesitant speech from Jill in all of extracts 1 to 6, which may signal that a 'delicate' matter is about to be broached (Silverman, 1997). Jill prefaces or tags her question with 'at the moment', indicating that it is current rather than past partnerships that are being queried. An exception to this is in Extract 5 where the local context of Milly's description of what she used to say when she was living with a man is followed by a question about how she would have described herself then (lines 14 to 16). A further question follows about her current situation, again using 'at the moment' (lines 21–22). The notion of 'at the moment' takes in the possibility that partners come and go and that having a partner may be a changeable state. Jill uses the word 'describe' in all versions of her question. In the Extract 1 version it is the hypothetical person whom the participant might 'describe as a partner', which is also used in relation to Milly's former partner in Extract 5, while in all the other versions here the query is about the participant's

self-description, 'would you describe yourself as having a partner?'

Although the context of the interview as being about singleness and with people who identify themselves as 'women alone' might suggest that 'no' is the expected answer to the question, there is some apparent accounting, albeit limited, in most of these extracts. 'No' is not left to stand on its own as a sufficient answer. In Extract 1, it is both intensified and qualified as 'not at all not recently', and in Extract 2 intensified to 'I haven't had a partner for years'. These brief statements also function as identity work for the speakers, indicating that absence of a person who fits the category 'partner' goes in the first extract further back than 'recently' and in the second extending to 'for years'. The question may be heard as checking whether the participant fits the category of 'woman alone', and therefore the criteria for being interviewed. If so these answers may be firm demonstrations that the speaker does indeed fit the category and has a track record of 'aloneness'.

Extract 3 seems at first not to show identity work accompanying the answer 'no': the 'no' is unqualified. However, it is followed up by a statement that again places the speaker firmly in the category of 'woman alone' and performs her identity: 'you wouldn't be interviewing me otherwise then would you?'. In Extract 4 the 'no' is a stretched out word, which seems to express some reluctance in the answer, but is not accompanied by identity work.

However, the speaker has already done such work in her comments in lines 1 to 4 and lines 6 to 7, giving positive descriptors for single in contrast with ticking the 'divorced' box when completing a questionnaire.

In Extracts 5 to 8 there are contrasts with the first four extracts in that they involve lengthier and more equivocal responses, which display more detailed accounting. In Extract 5 the speaker has several different questions to answer, all of which are treated in different ways. To the question 'would you have described yourself then as having a partner?' (lines 14–16) she gives a slightly hesitant 'mm' and a more confident 'yes' that follows as contiguous speech Jill's question 'you might describe him as your partner?'. In

response to the question (which invites the answer 'no') 'you wouldn't say that at the moment?' (lines 21–22) she gives a hesitant and stretched out 'no' which is then followed by accounting work to explain that person just referred to is no longer her partner and that currently she has a boyfriend rather someone she would call a partner (lines 23 to 30).

In Extract 6 the speaker gives a negative to having a partner but offers instead 'an affair', which she goes on to describe. It is not clear why 'affair' has been selected as a more suitable description than that of 'partner' or what the distinctive aspects of each are. What category of person might one be expected to have an affair with? A 'lover' perhaps? An affair seems to be an out-of-the-ordinary matter, perhaps seen as a light-hearted and temporary relationship, perhaps suggesting that it is something illicit. Lucy repeats Jill's use of 'at the moment' in her response in relation to both 'partner' and 'affair', so the duration of the relationship does not seem to be a defining criterion for distinguishing partnerships and affairs. The immediate information that it has been 'going on for about three years' lends support to this supposition. The assertion that it is 'the best relationship I've had with a man' suggests that the distinction is not about quality or lack of seriousness either. The distance of the parties and consequent difficulty in getting together, which they manage 'five or six times a year, but never for more than a couple of days' seems to be proffered as an account of why this is described as an affair.

There is identity work in this account. On the one hand, the speaker is having an affair with a man. This is a category bound activity which constructs her as heterosexual, although the descriptor that it is 'the best relationship I've had with a man' allows for the possibility that she has had other kinds of relationships with women. On the other hand, she does not live near him, or even see him that often, and she does not consider that he is a partner, all of which does work to suggest that she fits the category 'single'.

In Extract 5 Alix has some hesitation in choosing a form of words that she might use to introduce herself. She pauses several times, dismisses her first suggestion of 'young free and single', considers a reference to an ex-husband, repairs a possibility of 'looking for' to

a less active, more neutral 'there's space in my life for a partner'. Jill (lines 24 to 29) introduces the idea of an orderly and planned set of questions underlying the exchange, first by saying 'we can come back to those things' and then by her laughter because 'I was going to say would you describe yourself as having a partner at the moment?'. Alix treats this second observation as though Jill has asked the question, and produces several possible responses. She relegates one relationship of a few months earlier to the category 'fling' rather than 'partnership'. Now she does not know whether she has a partner. In contradiction to her earlier repaired suggestion that she might be 'looking for' (line 21) she says 'I sort of feel like I have in that I'm not looking I'm certainly not looking for anyone else', emphasising this with the intensifier 'certainly' and the repetition of 'not looking'. The issue is whether this unnamed relationship will 'turn into a partnership', which raises some questions of unspecified criteria for partnership. These may include duration of time. The man is elsewhere, and Alix will have to 'wait and see till he comes back'. It is not clear what will have to happen for it to 'turn into a partnership'. There is an implication that 'partner' is not a category that can be bestowed instantly on someone entering a new or changed relationship.

In Extract 6 Jill summarises earlier self-descriptions from Grace, 'single and you always have been', and offers her a potential identity conflict in following this with the question about having a partner. Grace draws out her 'yes' and hesitates in providing a justificatory account of how she can have a partner at a distance and still call herself single. Grace qualifies her initial claim to have a partner. She downgrades it to a 'weekend and holiday relationship', and suggests in lines 10 to 12 that it is others who treat them as a couple.

Participants demonstrated accounting work when they did not give a straightforward 'no' to a relatively direct request for information as to whether they had a partner. This leads me to suggest that, within the context of the interview, 'no' is the preferred turn shape in response to this question. I do not assume that this is the preferred response in other situations, and would expect that in the ordinary way 'no' would be the dispreferred turn shape, with 'yes' and brief description being preferred. As I have shown, there is a degree

of identity and accounting work in all of these extracts. This is more extensive in the last four extracts where speakers are accounting for someone who might be thought to fit the category 'partner'.

The next set of extracts give some more evidence of preference organisation and show other interesting features.

An odd question in the context of the interview

Extract 9

- | | | |
|----|------|--|
| 1 | Sue | No, I don't mind |
| 2 | Jill | Yeah |
| 3 | Sue | Just th- I just I just use Ms as a as a |
| 4 | | equivalent of Mr as a (0.5) gender |
| 5 | | differen[tiation] |
| 6 | Jill | [yeah] yeah |
| 7 | Sue | and I don't really care if people think |
| 8 | | whatever they think |
| 9 | Jill | Yeah okay an:d (0.5) because people |
| 10 | | obviously can be in a range of situations |
| 11 | | I'm asking everyone whether they would |
| 12 | | describe themselves as (0.5) having a |
| 13 | | partner at the moment |
| 14 | Sue | Right I don't have a partner no |
| 15 | Jill | Okay (1.0) Um (0.5) s:o th- the first sort |
| 16 | | of things that I want to talk about are |
| 17 | | kind of images of singleness (1.0) and the |
| 18 | | ones that we ourselves carry and [the] |
| 19 | Sue | [mm] |
| 20 | Jill | ones that we think other people do |

Extract 10

- | | | |
|----|-------|--|
| 1 | Jill | Um (1.5) would you at the moment would you |
| 2 | | describe yourself as having a partner? I'm |
| 3 | | sort of [asking that because] |
| 4 | Patsy | [No (0.5) I don't] |
| 5 | Jill | (.) people are in a [whole sort of range |
| 6 | | of situations] |
| 7 | Patsy | [Yes yes] yeah no no I |
| 8 | | haven't at all. |
| 9 | Jill | Okay (1.5) um (4.0) so (1.5) in thinking |
| 10 | | about things that you do and take part in |
| 11 | | you're obviously very active socially are |
| 12 | | are there any things that (1.5) you would |
| 13 | | say are problematic in in taking part in |
| 14 | | on your own things that you might want to |
| 15 | | do but perhaps (1.0) you think 'well no I |
| 16 | | won't do that 'cause it's just too much |
| 17 | | trouble' or |
| 18 | | (2.0) |

Extract 11

- 1 Jill Um (0.5) I'm asking just to (.) check
 2 really because people can be in a range of
 3 situations but (.) most people say that
 4 they haven't got anyone they think of as a
 5 partner at the moment do do you?
 6 Lyn =I don't have [anyone I think of as a
 7 partner no]
 8 Jill [°Not at the moment right°]
 9 (0.5) It just seems important because it
 10 sort of shifts a bit the way people might
 11 respond and [what I] might ask them I
 12 suppose
 13 Lyn [Yes]
 14 Jill Um okay .hh (1.0) well one of the sort of
 15 first (0.5) things I (1.0) I'm interested
 16 in knowing is (1.5) I mean you've said
 17 quite a few positive things (0.5) about
 18 what singleness means to you
 19 Lyn mm
 20 Jill and I wonder whether you have any memories
 21 of what it's meant at different times in
 22 your life perhaps, as a child or or
 23 [growing up]
 24 Lyn [mmm]

Extract 12

- 1 Jill °Oka:y° (0.5) I I'm asking people (0.5) um
 2 sort of almost not in the expectation that
 3 they would say 'yes' but because I've
 4 (0.5) realised that (0.2) just because
 5 people live alone and might think of
 6 themselves as single (1.0) doesn't
 7 necessarily mean they don't have someone
 8 who they think of as a partner
 9 Susie [mm]
 10 Jill [um] that obviously changes a bit in some
 11 of the ways people are thinking about some
 12 of the questions I ask
 13 Susie mm
 14 Jill would you say there is anyone you think of
 15 in that way?
 16 Susie Um (2.0) °hm° there is someone um (1.5)
 17 there is someone who's hugely important
 18 who cannot be called a partner because
 19 he's someone else's partner
 20 Jill Mm
 21 Susie um which does complicate things somewhat
 22 .hhh Um but no I wouldn't I would never
 23 call him 'my partner'

Extract 13

- 1 Jill Most people .hh who I'm talking to
 2 obviously because they've come (0.5) or
 3 I've heard of them or they've volunteered
 4 as as fitting the 'woman on their own'
 5 don't have a partner but sometimes they
 6 say they do and is there anyone that you
 7 think of as a partner?
 8 (1.5)
 9 Rachel Isn't that a contradiction in te:rms? hhhh
 10 Jill Mm
 11 Rachel Um (1.5) no I don't think of (1.0) myself
 12 as having a partner (2.0) but I: no I
 13 don't I don't I think of myself as (0.5) a
 14 single woman on my own um hhhhh with a
 15 possible relationship or friendship that
 16 may becom:e more important (1.0) but I
 17 certainly don't think of myself (0.5) as
 18 having a partner and if I did I wouldn't
 19 think of myself as single (1.0) I
 20 wouldn't be talking to you now

These extracts are primarily distinctive in that Jill's question is more convoluted. Extracts 9 to 11 all show relatively straightforward negative responses to the 'partner' question. In Extract 9, Sue opens with a response to a comment from Jill about difficulties other women have encountered in using 'Ms'. Jill follows up with an account of the question she is 'asking everyone', explaining it as 'because people obviously can be in a range of situations'. Here the hesitation and form of the question appear to be less because of the potential delicacy of the question and more an explanation of why a question that might appear odd in the context of an interview on singleness is being asked. Sue understands the question as being put to her even though she has not actually been asked for her own situation. Sue's response (line 14) is a straightforward 'Right I don't have a partner no' and does not include further accounting. It may be that the shift in the shape of the question that has been indirectly put makes it less of a personal accounting issue – the person to whom it is addressed is simply an example of 'everyone' rather than an individual dealing with a delicate question.

In Extract 10 there is overlapping speech as Patsy answers the question that has been put while Jill continues accounting for asking such a question. Again this is a straightforward 'no', although Patsy's overlapping acknowledgement 'yes, yes, yeah' in line 7 with Jill's

explanation makes the speech more complicated. Patsy repeats her negative response and adds an interesting reinforcement: 'I haven't at all'. This may be in relation to Jill's suggestion that there is a 'whole sort of range of situations', which has constructed partnership as potentially a complex matter for interpretation or detection. As in Extract 9, the accounting from Jill appears to be more in relation to the oddness of the question in this context, rather than any general delicacy.

Extract 11 shows accounting from Jill before she asks the question, and a strong indication that a 'no' answer is expected: 'most people say that they haven't got anyone they think of as a partner'. There are some slight pauses in Jill's assertion that the request is 'just to check really' (lines 1 and 2). The meaning of checking in this context is not clear, one possible meaning is as a reference to the authority of the record and the orderly process of the interview which requires that all questions be asked whether or not they are necessary (as in a survey interview). Another possible meaning is that she might be expected to know already whether or not Lyn has a partner. Lyn's negative answer follows on immediately without any accounting and Jill chimes in with quiet and overlapping speech; 'not at the moment right', and then gives further explanation of why the answer to the question is important information.

Why does Jill interject this overlapping modification to Lyn's response? Jointly constructed utterances involving simultaneous speech are usually observed to involve shared knowledge of local events (Coates, 1996, p. 122) or to imply that the first utterance was incomplete (Sacks, 1992, Vol 1 p. 654). Lyn has not finished her response, and rather than predicting what she might be about to say, Jill's comment seems to be suggesting more an improvement or a softening of her statement. I suggested earlier that the function of the regular appearance of 'at the moment' linked to the questions about a partner was to indicate an interest in the current, as well as a recognition that having a partner may be a changeable state. However, the use of the phrase here highlights another possibility. Not having a partner 'at the moment' offers some flexibility to the category of 'woman alone', which can also be seen as a transitory category which does not have to fix the incumbent

for all time. The overlapping speech here indicates some effort from Jill to mitigate the impact of a delicate question and a potential difficulty in giving a negative response to it. Goffman (1955) observes that members will go to some lengths to save the feelings and face of others. He suggests that tact is often reliant on a tacit agreement to use unofficial communication where the sender acts as if she has not officially conveyed the message she has hinted at, while the recipient has the right to act as if she has not officially received the message contained in the hint. Jill's quiet interjection, which is not followed up or acknowledged further by either herself or Lyn, appears to be an example of such face-work.

Extracts 12 and 13 have some contrasting forms of response, to questions that like the others in this set involve some equivocation from Jill about why she is asking the question. Susie in Extract 12 does not give a straightforward negative to the question of whether there is anyone she thinks of as a partner. She hesitates, says 'um', then 'hm' for which she lowers the volume of her speech, and does some accounting work. She cannot assign the category 'partner' to the 'someone who's hugely important', since he belongs to a different category: 'someone else's partner'. There is an interesting assumption of partnership as a category bound activity involving serial monogamy. Having only one partner is presented as the normative state. While 'husband' (bigamy situations apart) is clearly a category that can only fit a person who does not have another wife, it would seem possible to consider 'partner' to be a more flexible category. If Susie had referred to the important person as her partner, this would have involved either ignoring the claim of someone else upon him as a partner or explaining that Susie is not the only partner of the person concerned. Instead she apparently attributes a stronger claim to the third person. As with Extract 7 there are questions of what gives someone the right to claim that a person is a partner, and in Extract 12 the issue appears to be over the possessive pronoun which Susie gives emphasis: 'I would never call him my partner'. There is an implication (left unstated) that the man would fit the category 'partner', but for the stronger claim of another to such a relationship.

The question put in Extract 13 takes a somewhat different form, in that it sets up two kinds of participants, one kind being 'most people' who fit the 'woman on their own' category who obviously don't have a partner, and the other kind who seem to be rarer ('sometimes') and say that they do. Effectively Rachel is being offered the opportunity to join either kind of participant, but one has a consistent identity while the other does not. She hesitates and then points to the contradiction and inconsistency and Jill gives a response token without attempting to explain or justify further. Like Thari in Extract 3, Rachel asserts her identity as a single woman on her own, and differentiates a 'possible relationship or friendship that may become more important' (lines 15 to 16) from thinking of herself as 'having a partner' which would be incompatible with the claim to be single.

The notion of a preference turn shape to the question 'do you have a partner' stands out more clearly in this set of extracts. Extracts 9 to 11 look like preferred 'no' responses. The speakers respond immediately to the question, and do virtually no accounting work for their answer. In Extracts 12 and 13 responses are delayed, involve hesitation and the speakers are drawn into accounting for their much more equivocal 'no' which is more of a 'maybe', suggesting a dispreferred turn.

A puzzle, however, remains when the lens of preference organisation is used in analysis. If 'no' is the preferred response, why does Jill interrupt in Extract 11 with some face-work ('not at the moment right') that implies that it might have been a better answer if Lyn had been able to say 'yes'? According to Goffman (1955), face-work takes place when a person presents an image that is inconsistent. Not to have a partner would seem to be consistent with an identity as a single woman, so where is the trouble coming from? Goffman also observes that 'face' is 'an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes' (Goffman, 1955, p. 213). The approved social attributes would seem to be the source of the difficulty. While in the context of the interview on singleness it is very much in keeping for a woman alone not to have a partner, in the wider context of everyday social interaction, not having a partner is not an approved social attribute. It is possible that Jill is attempting to ward off such trouble by her softening of Lyn's statement.

Shifts in the burden of accounting

Goffman's (1955) observations on face-work are also helpful in making sense of the different kinds of interaction that take place according to how participants are asked the question about whether they would describe themselves as having a partner. In discussing co-operation in face-work, Goffman suggests that lack of effort from one person induces compensatory effort on the part of others, while a contribution from one person relieves others of the task. In the first six extracts shown above, Jill's question was asked with little preamble. In each of these the other participant did some accounting work in giving their response. This was significantly less in responses 1 to 3 that gave the preferred 'no', where the turns that answer the question follow on almost immediately the question has been put. In Extracts 4 to 6 more accounting was given for a dispreferred response of a relationship that was respectively either not a partnership, not definitely a partnership yet, or partnership as a distance relationship that still allowed the speaker to consider herself as single. In Extracts 7 to 11 Jill takes on some of the accounting burden by giving explanations – at times quite laborious – as to why she is asking the question, either as a preamble or a follow up to asking the question. Effectively this accounting from Jill covers the kind of justifications made by participants who were asked the question without preamble. This may have had an impact on the extent of accounting work the person being interviewed then did. In Extracts 7 to 9 where the preferred 'no' is given, this appears a more unequivocal 'no' response than in Extracts 1 to 3, and again shows no delays or hesitations. In Extracts 10 and 11 where a dispreferred response is given an account follows and there is the more hesitant and delayed speech that might be expected in this turn shape.

Overall there seems to be a shift in who carries the burden of dealing with what I would suggest is a troubled interaction. Where Jill asks the question directly, the other participant does some accounting work, which varies according to whether a preferred or a dispreferred response is being given. When Jill equivocates and explains why she is asking the question, again varying according to the unequal alternative courses of action taken by

the other participant, they are able to give a more straightforward response. What I do not have is any examples of where this question was both asked and answered in a way that was free from accounting work. As I have argued throughout this study, I suggest that there is trouble surrounding the inferences commonly associated with the category 'single', and this sharing of the burden of accounting is another indication of it.

Identity work in talk-in-interaction

Another interesting feature of these extracts is the identity work that is done through the use of different categories. Being a woman alone does not give a clear and straightforward identity as single and partnership also seems problematic to explain and categorise.

Although 'do you have a partner?' appears to be a closed question that simply invites a yes/no answer, and the preference organisation seems to be for a 'no', it still seems to be difficult for anyone to say 'no' without someone in the interaction doing some accounting work. The extracts shown here suggest that this is work to indicate what kind of a 'no' it is. There may have been a partner at some time, even if not recently, and even if not for years. A total and uncompromising 'no' seems difficult to give, and difficult to receive, perhaps reflecting on the identity of the speaker as someone without an important social attribute of a central adult relationship. Explaining a relationship that does not fit the category 'partner' involves another kind of work. Speakers draw on different aspects, including their own attitude, as in Extract 7 'not looking for anyone else', 'what I'd like to see happen'; the other person's behaviour, 'have to wait and see till he comes back'; the claims of others, 'someone else's partner' (Extract 12); and the attitudes of others, 'other people don't like singleness, they want to make people into couples' (Extract 8). What counts as a partner, as well as what counts as single, is defined differently by the speakers. For some it is clear that the definition of being single does not allow for partnership, for others the boundaries are more fluid.

Speakers do a variety of kinds of work to build up a positive identity that can include a central relationship, or allow for satisfaction without one. Alix, for instance, in Extract 7,

evokes an identity of a woman who is complete without a man (plenty of commitments to other people, lines 14 to 15), remains open and receptive to a new possibility (not looking for anyone else, lines 45 to 46), while discriminating over what the future holds (have to wait and see, line 40). Her corrections and repairs help to work up this positive identity.

In these extracts it is apparent that speakers do identity work as discussed by Antaki and colleagues (1996) and Wetherell (1998). They invoke identities, negotiate their features and begin to accumulate a record of identities that can be drawn on in later conversational interactions (Antaki *et al.*, 1996). As I discussed in Chapter 1 the definition of singleness is not clear-cut, and the data discussed here suggests that partnership is also not easily defined or instantly recognisable. Singleness emerges here as a contested identity.

The interview context

It could be argued that the kind of troubled interaction displayed in this set of interviews is a result of the interview context. It does seem likely that some features of interviewing may have affected the interaction, and I explore these here.

A list of topics that I hoped to cover in interview includes the question 'Would you describe yourself as having a partner?' (see Appendix 3). This list, or a note of topic areas, was shared with participants before the interview, but it was not intended to be followed rigorously in the form in which it appeared. The corpus of data relating to discussion of partnership shows that some such question was asked of the majority of participants in individual interviews, although the question was only posed in exactly that form to a small number. In a few interviews there was discussion on partnership but the question as such was not asked. In these interviews, discussion was usually related to a participant's mention of a person that she saw regularly, and, as in Extract 4, might include a query from Jill as to whether the participant considered this person to be a partner. In the 16 interviews where a participant was asked *whether* she had a partner, the two different forms in which the question was put are divided evenly along the lines shown in the two sets of extracts shown above. One form for asking the question was a fairly direct request

for information, an example being: 'would you describe yourself as having a partner at the moment?' The other distinctive form in which the question was asked involved considerable equivocation from Jill to account for the question, an example being: 'I'm just asking also for the record really and also because I suppose it tends to shape what we talk about a bit, as to whether you would describe yourself as having a partner at the moment?'

It is not clear why the question was posed in these contrasting forms. Asking a person 'Do you have a partner?' is a question that could bring forth a simple yes/no answer without further elaboration. If the aim is just to establish whether all participants fit the category 'woman alone' as understood by the criteria for participation then this kind of answer might be satisfactory. There are times when it does appear as though this is why the question is being asked. For instance, in Extract 7 lines 27 to 29, Jill says 'I was going to say would you describe yourself as having a partner at the moment?' appearing to make a reference to a schedule or mental plan of an order to the interview. In Extract 11, lines 1 and 2, she says, 'I'm asking just to check really' and in the example I gave in the previous paragraph, she says, 'for the record really'. All perform similar functions of giving the impression that there is some order to the structure of the interview and some externality to the 'record' that needs to be kept of it. Procedures are being followed, whether or not the question seems relevant to the conversation that is also in process. However, this approach of ticking of the correct box is not the way that the interview was generally portrayed. Comments from Jill at the outset of interviews suggest a more informal sort of exchange, for instance: 'I suppose the whole thrust is about kind of making sense and what we make of our situation' and 'I'm interested in what people's ideas are'. Suggestions of a 'check' and a 'record' give the question some legitimacy, and frame the interview, and the taped record of it as a resource that will be referred to for accuracy.

There is a shift in the interview process from initial talk about preferred terms for self-introduction, and the general ways in which the participant might refer to herself, to this more direct and quite personal question. Questions about partners can be asked in survey

type interviews where boxes require completion by ticks or crosses. Casual enquiry on such matters is more difficult to bring off. Alongside phrases which serve to introduce this area of questioning almost under the guise of completion of a schedule of pre-planned questions, bridging phrases from Jill can also be seen, that work on making the question a more natural next thing to say. For instance, in Extract 8, lines 1 and 2 make a bridge summarising what Grace has already said about herself 'so you are single and you always have been' and moving on to ask her about a partner. In Extract 2, a similar connection is made with Mary: 'you said you've got lots of friends, would you describe yourself as having a partner at the moment or no?' (lines 1–4). Questions about partners – in particular questions on whether or not they exist – do not fit easily into casual talk. Generally, personal questions require some kind of relevance to the conversation, or to prior knowledge about co-participants. So ordinarily, an enquiry might be made about a known partner: 'How is X?' Knowledge about others is usually built up by moving from the known to the unknown and Jill's bridging introduction to the topic works, somewhat uncomfortably, on these lines.

Sacks points to a rule of conversation, that if you ask a question you have a chance to talk again afterwards (Sacks, 1992, pp. 51–56). The person who asks a question has control of the conversation, according to Sacks, and can 'perform an operation' on the answers to draw some kind of conclusion (p. 54). We can see the rule of the chance to talk again in the extracts shown in this section, but there is no clearly identifiable 'operation' being done or conclusion being drawn from the answers about a partner. Where the preferred 'no' has been given, there is usually an 'okay' response from Jill, often in a lowered voice level, followed by a pause before the next area of questioning. It seems there is little to be said about the inability of someone to describe herself as having a partner. This can be examined in more detail in Extract 3, and I reproduce this extract here, and show more of the ensuing interaction.

Extract 14

- 1 Jill [...] Anyway (0.5) .hh okay and (0.5) at the
 2 moment would you describe yourself as as
 3 having a partner?
- 4 Thari No
 5 (1.0)
- 6 Jill °Oka:y° (1.0) [and]
 7 Thari [But] you wouldn't be
 8 interviewing me otherwise hh then would
 9 you? [huh] huh
- 10 Jill [huh] it's surprising what people
 11 sa:ay [you know]
- 12 Thari [oh right?]
- 13 Jill I realise that just because someone's said
 14 they're single doesn't necessarily mean
 15 [that] they
- 16 Thari [oh I see]
- 17 Jill don't have a partner they might not be
 18 living with them
- 19 Thari right
- 20 Jill but they might still think of someone
 21 important in their lives as a partner
- 22 Thari right
- 23 Jill or they might have someone important in
 24 their lives and say well no they're not a
 25 partner but they're
- 26 Thari yeah
- 27 Jill my boyfriend and they ring me three times
 28 a day
- 29 Thari yeah
- 30 Jill um (0.5) so I think I'm learning hhh
 31 [what]
- 32 Thari [mmm]
- 33 Jill that (0.5) nothing is obvious
- 34 Thari yeah
- 35 Jill really

In Extract 3, where Thari simply answers Jill's question with 'no', the absence of accounting from either participant seems at its most stark, until Thari overlaps Jill's introduction to a new topic with 'But you wouldn't be interviewing me otherwise then would you?' and laughs. This acts as piece of face-work from Thari, to reassert her 'rightness' as fitting the category 'woman alone'. By her laughter she also minimises any loss of face for Jill in having asked what appears to be a pointless and unnecessary question. She has also taken over the role of 'questioner' and the onus is now on Jill to do some accounting. Jill proceeds to account for her surprising question, and Thari joins in

with overlapping responses and agreements before Jill has given much by way of explanation. This suggests more work from Thari to retract a possible threat from her to Jill's face and to show accord.

I have suggested that the more equivocal and convoluted form of Jill's question about a partner is to explain what seems an odd question in the context of the overall subject of the interview, rather than oriented to the delicacy of the question. It can be seen as an attempt to pre-empt the kind of challenge that Thari produces in this interaction. However, it may also be worth considering that the equivocal form of the question avoids the situation seen in lines 1 to 6 of Extract 14. Here neither participant initially does any accounting work, and Jill is left with a preferred 'no' response to which she has no further comment to make by way of conclusion to this topic. She gives a token response and pauses awkwardly before what looks like an introduction to the next topic (line 6).

Conclusion

An aim of CA is to avoid being led by theory in analysis of the data, and I have tried to follow this tenet in my approach in this chapter. However, I do of course have an interest in social interaction and singleness, and this is what led me to consider looking at these particular aspects of data. My interest in what I call 'everyday trouble' arose from my own experience that beyond a certain (unspecified) age, to be single is a social identity that requires explanation. At the same time it seemed to me there were no easy conversational routes that allowed for introduction of single status as an aspect of identity. How do we make personal information about ourselves known to others, and how do we find out about them?

Kitzinger has shown how normative assumptions about kinship, heterosexuality and family life are evident in the handling of calls to medical services, and that when a caller is ringing to ask for advice for someone who is not a member of their family, they become involved in explaining and accounting for their concern (Kitzinger, 2003). When they are calling on behalf of a family member, explanations are not needed, the person is

undertaking a category-bound activity that is 'natural', understood and oriented to immediately by the recipient of the call. It seems likely that the same kind of normative assumptions are made in everyday social interaction. References to partners, husbands or children will be understood and oriented to by participants in the interaction as relationships within a category set of 'family', and contributing to an identity for the speaker. I suggest that part of the everyday routine for single women involves negotiating their way through and past category sets in which they either have no place, or need to explain in what ways they belong.

It might be assumed that any difficulties that single women have in everyday interactions flow from economic disadvantages or perhaps reproductive reasons: that society favours heterosexual couples because they more clearly contribute to the maintenance of society. However, what the data discussed in this chapter suggests is that the trouble in interactions does not follow in a logical way from problems that 'belong' to the incumbent of the category. As I discussed in the Introduction to this thesis and in Chapter 1, singleness is difficult to define, and the extracts considered here give evidence of the contested and imprecise meanings of singleness. Trouble persists across different and blurred meanings of singleness. This suggests that it is an ideological problem, and that the interactions shown in this data link to the everyday practices experienced by single women.

The detailed examination of interaction in these extracts from interviews shows that even in this context in which an attempt is being made to create a comfortable, stigma-free space for discussion, interactional trouble emerges that appears to be linked to the wider ideological climate surrounding singleness. My theorising on the preference organisation of responses to questions about a partner is somewhat tentative, as the corpus is not large enough to demonstrate the pattern conclusively. The trouble in interaction is not dramatic stuff, and might not even be recalled as problematic by the participants involved.

However, the data suggest that there is some trouble around the category 'singleness' and shows how trouble occurs in the interactions of the interview.

In the final chapter I draw together the arguments in this thesis.

CHAPTER 8

Conclusions

Oxford English Reference Dictionary: spinster n. 1 an unmarried woman. 2 a woman, esp. elderly, thought unlikely to marry.

(Pearsall and Trumble, 1996)

Wickedary: 'Spinster n: a woman whose occupation is to Spin, to participate in the whirling movement of creation; one who has chosen her Self, who defines her Self by choice neither in relation to children nor to men; one who is Self-identified; a whirling dervish, Spiraling in New Time/Space.' p. 167

'Old Maid n: a Crone who has steadfastly resisted imprisonment in the Comatose State of matrimony: SURVIVOR, SPINSTER.' p. 150

(Daly with Caputi, 1987)

Introduction

This thesis has investigated different meanings of singleness as understood by women who are alone. I have examined how women work with a 'single' identity in a social context that is changing rapidly. I have looked at how identity and self-representation are constituted in the broad discursive resources used by participants in this study. I have also examined in more detail some troubled interactions in the interview itself, and considered what such analysis contributes to understanding of the stigma and social exclusion faced by women alone.

In this concluding chapter I draw together the threads of the argument of my thesis. First, I summarise the analysis that has been presented. Next, I consider the contribution made by my thesis to different research literatures. Following this, I discuss the importance of discourse and talk in the wider context of the creation of identities, and the politics of singleness. Discursive resources allow for different possibilities for singleness and it is through the employment of discursive resources in talk that single identities are worked up and performed. Finally, I reflect on the process of this research project.

Summary of the analysis presented

At the outset of this study I argued that although there have been changes in the meanings attached to singleness, there is also much continuity with historical notions of singleness as a devalued status for women. Women do have more and different choices about how

they engage in intimate relationships. However, they do this in a context that continues to privilege idealised and ideological notions of what 'relationships' or 'the family' should mean.

A wide range of empirical social science and popular literature on singleness includes advice from the authors on how women should deal with the 'problem' of their single state. Although stigma is recognised and explored, the problems are invariably dealt with at a personal level. The literature overall is patchy and under-theorised. This literature also contributes to the discursive context of singleness. The changing meanings of singleness, noted in my thematic review of literature, are crucial resources drawn on by women in their narrative and identity work.

I have argued that the discursive context of singleness is an important area for investigation. This discursive context marks the identity of the single woman through the discursive resources that are available for making sense of life patterns. There has been little exploration in the literature to date of how women alone respond to and work with the typical constructions of the identity available to them. My thesis addresses this gap in the literature.

In theorising an approach to the single identity that draws on the discursive context I have noted the prescriptive nature of some models of identity that can be detected in the empirical literature on singleness. In contrast, I consider the single identity to be a project that women work up through their social practices: in particular through their talk. Singleness is something that people *do*. The models of identity that emerge in the literature are also cultural resources that women may draw on in order to understand and explain their situation if they are alone. They are, in addition, notions of how things 'should' be, which women may use more by way of self-discipline. They may, for instance, seek to measure themselves against the expectations of a life cycle model suggesting there are life stages or tasks to be completed by single women. Alternatively, they may resist such implications in their discursive and narrative performances.

I wanted to look both at how women talked about singleness, and what their talk showed of their construction of a single identity in social interaction. The most effective way to generate data that could satisfy this dual focus was to set up 'discursive events' in the form of individual and group interviews. I have discussed the nature of interviews and some different everyday understanding of interviews which participants, including myself as interviewer, may have oriented to. If the context of an interview, as might commonly be supposed, has an influence on the unfolding of talk, then this will be evident in the talk itself. I none the less consider that the talk that ensued in my interviews was jointly constructed and was 'action': capable of constructing selves and whole social worlds.

Within a broadly discursive approach, I have used a range of methods and different levels of research questions to analyse my data. In Chapter 4, I used a critical discursive psychology approach to identify some broad cultural resources that underpin singleness, and to examine the discursive moves associated with their use that commonly emerged. Although there are some positive resources for considering singleness as independence, choice, self-development and achievement, these are also quite idealised. Most participants also drew on more negative interpretative repertoires of singleness as personal deficit and social exclusion: these shadowed and undermined the positive repertoires. The highly positive *and* highly negative interpretative repertoires that my participants drew on presented them with ideological dilemmas. One result appeared to be that in their talk participants created or contended with troubled subject positions for themselves. One common strategy was to construct the self as not a typical member of the category 'single'. Where singleness is constructed as positive it becomes difficult to talk about any desire to move out of this category. If women talk about their wish for a relationship then it is hard to hold on to a positive sense of the self and a common pattern with participants was to ward off an appearance of failure through avowals of not being desperate. The most promising strategy adopted by some participants for avoiding these dilemmas was to acknowledge directly the contradictions and then explore the consequences for them in their personal identity work.

The next two chapters analysed data using different discursive approaches to narrative to examine the rhetorical work that participants did to deal with the dominant cultural storyline for women of marriage and family relationships. First, in Chapter 5 I focused on one woman's self-narrative of life and relationships. I used extracts from the account to exemplify three frames that were commonly used, separately or together, by participants. In contrast to Gergen and Gergen's suggestion that narratives of relationships often take a form that is either progressive or regressive towards a valued end-point, I look on progress or its reverse as a resource which might be drawn on, but not necessarily used in a consistent way. Sarah's narrative uses frames of the life cycle, life events and life as progress. The life cycle frame makes reference to the dominant cultural storyline of stages and events such as marriage and the birth of children. It provides a resource that participants can fashion in their own way as well as a commonly anticipated set of events that participants may want to differentiate themselves from. A life events frame, showing an interruption to life plans from an unpleasant event, offers speakers a justification for their apparent failure to conform to the storyline of marriage and children. The framing of life as progress through self-improvement towards a valued end-point of the speaker's own choosing, allows for an alternative to the story of a happy-ever-after marriage.

In Chapter 6 I looked at the different ways in which participants in my study negotiated agency in their self-narratives. Rather than investigate whether women have 'really' chosen to be single, I approached 'choice' as part of the discursive resources available and considered the implications for identity work that stem from its different kinds of usage.

Interpretative repertoires that stress 'choice' or 'chance' in the matter of initiating or continuing an intimate relationship offered different subject positions to participants.

These repertoires provide a woman on her own with some flexible ways that can present herself either as having some agency in the events and relationships of her life, or as swept along by fate and contingency. However, while each repertoire solved certain dilemmas in allowing the speaker to represent herself as empowered in the relationships game, it also brought with it other quandaries. I suggested that the interactional trouble brought by the

contradictory subject positions that participants developed was the reason for considerable movement by participants between repertoires. The effect was of the speaker doing a kind of dance as she alighted on different positions.

In Chapter 7 I explored the problematic nature of presenting a positive identity as a single woman in everyday interactions. The detailed conversation analytic examination of interaction within the interview showed the emergence of interactional trouble that, I suggest, is linked to the wider ideological climate surrounding singleness. I examined patterns in the way a question was asked concerning whether the participant had a partner and in the responses to this question. My data suggested that within the context of the interview on singleness, 'no' was the preferred turn shape to this question. 'Yes' (which was rarely the response) was the dispreferred turn shape, as shown by responses in which the speaker accounted for a relationship that she did not consider was a partnership.

However, the identification of this kind of preference organisation is not to suggest that replying in the negative to a question about whether one has a partner is entirely trouble-free. The question was often accompanied by 'face-work' (Goffman, 1955) from the interviewer to explain what appeared an odd question in the context of an interview on singleness. I argued that the questions on partnership provoked trouble in the interaction, and that there were shifts in whether it was interviewer or interviewee who bore the burden of accounting work to save face and deal with this trouble. In the extracts discussed, when the interviewer asked the question in a direct fashion, the other participant usually did some accounting and identity work in her response. In contrast, when the interviewer accounted at more length for asking the question, the other participant did less accounting work. I suggested that this sharing of the burden of accounting is further evidence of the trouble surrounding the associations stored in the category 'single'.

The contribution to the research literature

This thesis draws on two main bodies of literature: empirical social science work on

singleness (sociological or social psychological in approach) and critical discursive psychology. In this section I describe ways in which my research has contributed to these literatures.

Much of the empirical literature on singleness pre-dates the discursive turn in the social sciences. New perspectives on identity, subjectivity, categories, social action and practice that have emerged in recent years have not been hitherto fully integrated into the reporting of empirical research on singleness. The existing literature has worked mainly within a realist framework and a potentially simplistic understanding of representation and rather simple, essentialist psychological models of identity.

My contribution has been to bring the literature up to date by viewing singleness through the lens of the discursive turn. I have shifted the gaze from single women as problematic individuals, through consideration of the nature of the identity resources available. By taking a non-essentialist approach, and allowing meanings to emerge, I have drawn attention to variability and flexibility in my data. The subject negotiates her identity. She is not fixed by category membership, rather she is variable, dynamic and mobile. This subject, none the less, works within some cultural constraints. She cannot reinvent herself in just any way she chooses. I have achieved a better understanding of how trouble, problematic categories and deficit notions of singleness can be seen in social interaction. Rather than taking for granted that singleness is a problematic identity, I have explored how participants worked up their identities within the interview context.

A focus on the discursive climate has also brought a sense of relativity, cultural change, history and contingency. It provides a way of studying shifts in meaning making. This enables the recognition that there is no enduring, essential and fixed nature to singleness. Once this is recognised, it is possible to attend to the contribution of the 'social' in what might appear to be individual pathways and personalities. I have aimed to show, in this thesis, how the social and the psychological are intertwined.

I have applied the methods of the developing discipline of critical discursive psychology to

my chosen topic. My work builds on a synthetic approach of drawing from different traditions of discourse theories (Wetherell, 1998; Billig, 1999; Wetherell and Edley, 1999). This approach in general demonstrates that it can be useful to combine an interest in the local nature of talk and the particular meanings that participants make of their interactions with a consideration of the broad cultural resources that they draw on.

In this thesis I have combined together a range of styles of analysis. This includes making use of critical discursive psychology theorising on interpretative repertoires, subject positions and ideological dilemmas; theorising from the broad field of narrative studies; and the theoretical insights available from conversation analysis. I have shown how these contrasting styles of analysis can work together to address a major empirical question. I have demonstrated how each style of analysis is fit for a different purpose, and draws out different aspects of the empirical question. I have also demonstrated the relevance of interviews set up for critical discursive psychology analytical purposes.

I have argued for the importance of discursive resources made available in the wider cultural context as well as everyday talk in single women's construction of their subjectivity and identity. I turn now to consideration of the relevance of discourse and talk to the development of an 'identity politics' for women alone.

The importance of discourse and talk in identity politics

The polarised and contradictory nature of resources for talking about singleness leads to difficulty in performing a 'single' identity that gives an empowered sense of self. Much of the literature on singleness focuses on internal and personal changes that single women should be encouraged to make as individuals. In contrast, my argument is that we need to develop the resources for talking about singleness. Discourse is not ephemeral and talk is not trivial. Discourse is action: it is highly material and efficacious. People do things with their talk: they build social worlds (Wetherell, 2001b). The categories for talking about the self that any culture makes available have a profound effect on people's lives.

Paradoxically, individuals none the less talk and act as though their lives were the outcome

of individual and unconstrained choices 'made in the furtherance of a biographical project of self-realization' (Rose 1991, p. 12).

If discourse is so powerful, how might some change be brought about in the discursive resources available? The matter of resources is not unconnected with individuals, since their use involves a social practice – talk – which is carried out by individuals. Clearly such practices do change over time, but in spite of many changes in relations between men and women, the notion of singleness as a deviant and deficit category seems remarkably enduring. I have drawn attention in this thesis to the continuing importance of gendered power relations and to notions of a woman's proper place. Is it inevitable that those who are single have to continue to orient to, and defend themselves against, an affinity between singleness and failure? What responsibility do those who are not single bear? Do marriage and singleness have to be seen as binary categories or can we recognise a more fluid set of possibilities of intimate relationships? My data suggest that since the early feminist work on such matters there has still been little progress in unsettling the privileging of the ability to make long-term, close and lasting relationships as the mark of emotional maturity (see Adams, 1976).

Changes in the discursive resources drawn on in other areas of stigma and oppression such as those relating to racism may still leave resilient areas of oppressive discourse. However, the relation between discourse, social structures and social practices is complex, and even ordinary interventions may have significant effects (Wetherell and Potter, 1992). At any one moment the number of discourses in competition for meaning is finite, and the conflict between different discourses has been theorised as creating the possibilities for new ways of thinking, new subject positions (Weedon, 1987). I suggest that the possibilities for a wider range of resources for talking and theorising about singleness have hardly begun to develop, and attention to the discursive climate of singleness is an important first step.

One of my interview questions was about whether participants recognised a 'politics of

singleness'. This notion of a particular identity politics was not always easily articulated or delineated by participants, but ideas did emerge in response to this interview topic. Not all participants identified themselves as feminist, but some spoke of earlier feminist influences in their lives, or made links with feminist thinking on the family as a repressive structure. There were some embryonic discourses of resistance intimated: some of it guided by other political discourses such as egalitarianism, humanism or anti-oppressive practice. For instance, participants sometimes expounded their ideas on 'correct' ways of talking about singleness. Several participants mentioned the British politician, Ann Widdicombe, as someone who is stereotyped in media representations as a single, ageing, woman, rather than criticised for her policies. The notion was that this was not the right way to talk about a person, and could be challenged in the same way that racist or sexist references might be. One person drew on a humanist discourse in relation to herself, arguing that even if she was 'emotionally crippled' there still had to be a place for her as a woman on her own. A number of participants suggested that as recognition of single people's purchasing power increased so would their power in other kinds of social context. While my data do not suggest that there are already creative new discourses of singleness emerging, there is an indication of interest from participants in developing their ways of thinking on this subject.

One issue in developing an identity politics of singleness is whether it is in women's interests to promote the idea of single women as a stigmatised group who should perceive some common cause and become recognised, appreciated and listened to more often. My data have suggested that singleness moves in and out of being a salient identity even in an interview with a focus on this topic. How far might women who are on their own *want* to see some commonality with other women who are alone? Different circumstances and identifications may emphasise contradictions instead, for instance in relation to those 'others' who have either stayed single, are divorced, widowed, with or without children, or are straight or lesbian. Differing identities may seem more obvious rallying points for an understanding of oppression. For instance, some participants saw single motherhood,

race, sexuality, disability, or womanhood in general as more crucial to their self-image. Where some had developed strategies that sought to challenge marginalising expectations these were often drawn from their experience in relation to other oppressions. There may be limitations to how far such strategies can develop in relation to singleness. Identity politics has been criticised as essentialist, reifying boundaries between groups, and undemocratic within groups, homogenising difference (Cain and Yuval-Davis, 1990). Furthermore, the areas in which identity politics has been most effectively developed, such as disability or race, depend on a particular construct at the heart of them over which there is some shared understanding. A political move – a struggle to (re)articulate the meaning of experience in ways that make sense politically (Gill, 1998) – is required if women alone are to see a single identity as leading to a particular feminist standpoint. The meanings of singleness are so diverse, and the possibilities for moving in and out of the status so fluid, that a politics for single women may not have a similar trajectory to other areas of identity politics. It is difficult to imagine a feminist new social movement comprised of women who identify as single. What might it look like? Yvonne Roberts (1997), in her novel *The Trouble With Single Women*, gives a risible depiction with a character who leads a new organisation ‘Save our Spinsters’ (SOS), and is appearing in a televised panel discussion (called *The Perfumed Pound*) about the new single woman.

“We want to reclaim the word ‘spinster’ and make it synonymous with joy, celebration, pride, choice – ”Chris Odell spoke as if she had written one too many mission statements.

“We believe that a woman’s natural choice is to be single ... roam free ... to opt for no long-term partner.”

(Roberts, 1997, p. 376)

In this fictionalised version there are echoes of Mary Daly’s (1987) ideas for changing the meaning of ‘spinster’ and ‘old maid’, contained in her ‘wickedary’: a project for reclaiming words for women in a different kind of dictionary. Her versions are compared with a more conventional dictionary definition at the head of this chapter. The idea of devising more positive connotations for singleness, and indeed a social movement, is not a new one.

Cicely Hamilton (1909) argued in *Marriage as a Trade* that there was a need to create a

large class of spinsters who were making a positive choice, although in her strategy this was a tactic to improve the lot of women generally (Hamilton, 1909, cited in Jeffreys, 1985, p. 91). Ideas of singleness as a positive choice, and one that brings freedom and satisfaction, will be empowering for some women. However, the formulations I have referred to here also construct singleness for women as opposed to coupledness and marriage, and in particular opposed to men. In contrast, one of the dilemmas noted in my analysis is how women can have a positive notion of singleness that still allows them to articulate desire for a relationship.

An alternative approach is to look for constructive developments that may emerge from wider recognition of the diversity of human relationships and the degree to which everyone moves in and out of intimate relationships, changes in the shape and make-up of families, different kinds of commitments. This way of thinking was also commonly drawn on by participants to this study. As with the social category 'women' (Condor, 1989), rather than being a rallying-point, singleness only becomes salient in particular contexts. From this perspective the multiplicity of meanings of singleness is its strength, rather than a problem. However, again, this kind of thinking was used by participants in ways that seemed to deny the existence of problems, as though an acceptance of diversity in relationships was already incontestably established. Yet at different points in the interview they would say things that indicated some continued wrestling with dilemmatic thinking. It is, of course, possible that the pace of social change in intimate relationships is moving so rapidly that the political tasks for single women are also constantly shifting.

Both these approaches to singleness have a contribution to make as well as limitations. My own position is to see opportunities for attention to the different discursive patterns and meaning-making of experiences employed by women alone as useful resources for all women, whether or not they consider themselves to be single. We need to develop our ability to recognise some of the repertoires that are being drawn on, that appear to be only common-sense, and yet which construct a world in which single women are held to blame for their lack of fit with normative aspirations. We need to recognise the ideological

dilemmas of singleness, without making patronising assumptions that those who are alone are struggling with circumstances that no one would choose. At the same time there is a need for some unravelling of the myth-making around coupledness and family life and the high importance attached in the public arena to being part of a couple.

Sara Mills (2003) in an article on anti-sexism and women's choices of Ms or Mrs in their naming practices, notes that a range of tactics were employed by her participants, and there was no uniformity in what women might claim to be a feminist approach:

In thinking of the way that discursive change occurs [...] strategically choosing particular options for particular contexts, and inflecting those choices positively is a more productive model than the Utopian notion that sexism can be reformed out of existence.

(Mills 2003, p. 103)

Change does not come about simply by new, positive repertoires replacing old and defunct ones. Working with and exploring the contradictions in positionings, desires and practices, and thus in the subjectivity, which coexist in the old and the new (Hollway, 1984), may open up the possibilities for change. A way forward for developing a politics of singleness may be to recognise that women make strategic decisions that do not have to be the same for everyone, but are based on some common understanding of issues of marginalisation.

Reflections on the research process

I have already argued for the positive contribution that my research approach has made and the robustness of my analysis. In this section I address some of the limitations as well as challenges of my research process. There has been some tension in this thesis caused by my focus, on the one hand, on different emerging meanings of singleness, and on the other hand, the need to make some decisions on the selection of participants. The benefits in restricting attention to women not currently involved in a partnership seem obvious. Yet this is not an unproblematic distinction to make, as the interview data in Chapter 7 indicate. Excluding women who keep their legally single status yet are in long-term couple relationships has meant the loss of some additional meanings of singleness. Their inclusion would perhaps have shown even more strongly the blurring of categories and

have been revealing about categorisation practices. It might also have brought some benefits in terms of identifying more overall interpretative resources available to single women.

Similarly, there are limitations as well as benefits in focusing solely on women in a research project. A focus on women has been a good starting point for me, and, as with the selection based on 'aloneness', has allowed me to have a sample of a size that has made it possible to discern some meaningful patterns. I chose to give detailed attention to the discursive climate for women, and have no doubts that this is a legitimate task to undertake. However, the absence of interviews with men means that there is a relational dimension that is missing from my discussion. Femininity and masculinity are not absolutes: they are negotiated in relation to each other, and inclusion of men among participants could have aided a different understanding of how this works.

I aimed to work with a relatively small sample with a broadly shared social position, and to develop a rich understanding of a group of women who are not reported on often.

However, there are differences of race, class, age, sexual orientation and parenting status within my group of participants. The focus on identifying patterns and use of shared discursive resources means that it has not been easy to attend to possible differences of inflection based on participants' other key category membership or identity projects. It is also difficult with a small sample to draw out any such differences in a way that could allow for any meaningful commentary on their relationship to other identity possibilities, without getting drawn into essentialist assumptions about 'who' a speaker 'really' is (see also Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001). I have tried to give some sense of variations as well as patterns in the way that participants drew on cultural resources, and not to make claims that cannot be justified by my data overall. I have referred to a speaker's age or other attributes where these appear salient and implied, but not necessarily articulated, in the extract shown. In general, I have provided extensive extracts from a range of the interviews undertaken, and these give readers some opportunity to make their own interpretations of the data.

Finally, in this consideration of challenges in the research process, I have discussed, in the Introduction and in Chapter 3, the ways in which my research focus developed and changed. There have been some tensions for me in making use of an approach drawn from critical discursive psychology that contrasts with my initial wish to validate and promote the voices of single women. I recognise that what 'counts as experience' is not straightforward and is always an interpretation, as well as needing to be interpreted (Scott, 1991). However, I have not wanted to lose respect for the person, and her own meaning making, in the shift to giving attention to patterns in the use of cultural resources. It is a common assumption that discourse is in some way ephemeral, and that an interest in how talk is carried out does not lead to an exploration of matters of intense personal significance. I hope that I have held on to recognition that in talking of their lives participants were talking about something deeply personal. They worked at making sense of their experiences. Any recognition of patterns should not diminish the personal significance of the sense making undertaken by individual speakers. Rather it should be a resource for the women involved to be able to gain a better understanding of how their personal articulations intersect with the available cultural resources.

Appendix 1

Women Alone

Are you a woman aged between 35 to 60 years living alone/outside a committed partner relationship?

I am a lecturer at the Open University doing research on the meanings of 'singleness'. I want to talk to women who have always been single or who have become single again for at least the last five years, for instance through divorce or widowhood. My interest is in what being single means to you now, what it has meant to you in the past, what kind of choices you have made, and your hopes for the future. I am single myself since divorce in my twenties, and am now in my middle years.

If you are interested in taking part either in an individual meeting with me, lasting about an hour, or in a mixed group discussion, please phone me on XXXXX or write to me at the address below. All interviews will be kept completely confidential.

Ms Jill Reynolds
School of Health and Social Welfare
The Open University
Walton Hall
Milton Keynes
MK7 6AA.

Appendix 2

Table of participants showing occupation, age bands, marital status and parenting status

Name	Occupation	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49	50-54	55-60
Shelley	Secretary			AS			
Val	Computer programmer				SA ^c		
Sarah	Therapist					AS	
Milly	IT Trainer	AS					
Josie	Teacher					SA ^c	
Polly	Receptionist						AS
Thari	Teacher		AS ^c				
Sue	Counsellor			AS			
Susie	Probation Officer				SA		
Lucy	Lecturer				SA		
Mary	Nurse				SA		
Ruth	Student		AS				
Annie	Secretary				SA		
Margaret	Shop Assistant				AS ^c		
Marion	Service User Consultant				SA		
Lyn	FE Lecturer					AS	
Pat	Lecturer						AS ^c
Patsy	Management consultant			AS			
Rachel	Social work trainer					AS	
Pauline	FE Lecturer						AS
Maggie	Information work/research				AS		
Mya	Racial Equality Officer				AS ^c		
Jay	Housing Manager					SA ^c	
Alix	Lecturer			SA			
Claire	Therapist					SA	
Grace	Lecturer						AS
Molly	Social worker				AS		
Margot	Unemployed/trainer						SA ^c
Jane	Student			AS			
Jennifer	Student			AS			

AS = 'Always single' includes all those who have never married

SA = 'Single again' includes all those who are divorced or widowed

^c = Has a child or adult children

Appendix 3

Questions relating to topic areas

Introductory

I will be taping our conversation. It will be confidential and will not be listened to by anyone but me or a secretarial transcriber. I will use a pseudonym when quoting in my doctoral thesis anything you have said (you can choose your own alternative name if you wish) Do 'pass' on questions/areas you don't feel comfortable in discussing. I will provide a transcript or notes of our discussion – you can strike through anything you aren't happy with on reflection.

I hope to cover in discussion.

- 1 Just for the record, could you say a few things about yourself by way of introduction, who you are – describe yourself.
- 2 If a preferred term used that covers marital/living alone status, refer to it and check whether they have other ways of describing themselves, and/or if not – there are a number of ways in which women might describe themselves, or which are used by researchers – for instance single/divorced/separated/widowed/never-married/always single/single again/independent/free/alone/unattached – are any of these terms you use about yourself/and in what circumstances?
- 3 Would you describe yourself as having a partner?

Interactional issues

- 4 Do you have a mental image of what being single/preferred terms means to you?
- 5 How do you think other people think about singleness/preferred term? Stereotypes – How do you think people generally perceive single women? There have been some quite contrasting images – old maids who can't get a man, city singles who don't want a man, swingers or lonely losers – stereotypes often have a grain of truth in them – are there any that you'd use yourself or subscribe to?
- 6 When you meet new people, how do you get to know about whether they are single or what, and how would you get to know about you?
- 7 Some women find it difficult when people ask them directly whether they are married, or whether they have children. Is that something you notice?
- 8 Do friends ever query how come you aren't married or don't have children – how do you feel if they do?
- 9 Are there any kinds of social events/activities which are problematic for you as a woman on your own?
- 10 How do your family and close friends see your lifestyle? I had difficulty convincing my mother that I was content without a man. Some women find that to be independent can mean you are seen as over-assertive.

Relationships

- 11 What do you enjoy/find difficult about being single? – what are significant differences for you in terms of satisfaction compared to periods of your life when you have been more closely involved with a partner?
- 12 Can you say something about intimate relationships over the course of your life that have been important to you?
- 13 Women sometimes find it difficult to say whether they have made a choice to remain single/not establish a committed partnership – how do you understand why you haven't married/remarried? Do you see yourself as having made a choice?
- 14 (If not already covered) In what ways have those important relationships in your life influenced your 'choice'?

- 15 How would you compare your life overall with that of married friends/people in living-together committed partnerships in terms of satisfaction? (could be women or men, up to you to interpret how you wish).
- 16 What relationships would you say are most important to you currently – whose loss would make a significant impact? How often do you see/have contact with these people?
- 17 How do the other people you are in regular contact with (family/friends/colleagues) understand these relationships? Some feminists have pointed out that while it's normal to ask each other about our partners, other friendships are rarely pursued with such vigour.

Finally

- 18 Are you actively looking for a partner/wanting to establish a long-term commitment now?
- 19 – what are your thoughts about marriage or partnership in terms of your life as a whole?
– how might you have answered that 10/20 year ago?
– how do you think you might answer it in 10 years time?
- 20 Do you generally feel positively about your current status (i.e. single/independent/ living alone) or do you look for changes?
- 21 Do you think of yourself as a feminist? Do you find that feminism has much to say about your situation: Are you aware of drawing on feminist ideas in relation to singleness? Is there a 'politics of singleness?'

Jill Reynolds

7.5.98

Appendix 4

Women alone – areas for discussion

I will be taping our conversation. It will be confidential and anonyms – you may choose your own pseudonym which I will use if I quote anything you say. Do ‘pass’ on anything that you don’t feel comfortable in discussing. I will let you have a transcript or detailed notes of our discussion.

Introduction – main things you might want someone to know about you.

Preferred term that describes your status – e.g. single, divorced, separated, widowed, never-married, always single, single again, independent, free alone, unattached, other?

How we see ourselves – how others see us

Images of singleness, single women – your own over time, other people’s

How do you know who is single – and how do others know your status? e.g. at work, socially

Other people’s reactions/views on your lifestyle – what do you think they are?

Kinds of social activities – any limitations doing them alone?

Relationships

What you enjoy/find difficult about being single/on your own. Comparisons with being in a partnership

Important relationships over the course of your life

Your ideas on why you’ve not established/stayed in a committed partnership

Kinds of choices you’ve made – in relation to individuals, self fulfilment, work

Comparison between your lifestyle and people in partnerships/marriages

Friendships – their place in your life, changes over time

Future aims

Hopes for the future

Ideas and attitudes

Anything else!

Jill Reynolds
14.8.98

Appendix 5

Women Alone

Recording consent form

Date and location of recording

Details of contribution

I hereby consent to the recording of my contribution. The anonymised transcript may be used, in whole or in part, in any or all of the following ways (*NB please delete and initial any uses which you wish to exclude*):

- 1. For purposes of education and research
- 2. In an edited or abridged form
- 3. Publication

Please indicate any additional restriction which you wish to place on the use of your contribution:

.....

Signed Name

Date Address

.....

Appendix 6

Transcription symbols used in Chapters 4, 5 and 6

The transcription notation in these chapters is a very simplified version of that developed by Gail Jefferson (see Atkinson and Heritage, 1984b for a fuller account).

- [...] Material deliberately omitted
- [name] [place] Identifying details removed
- (laughs) Hearable laughter from the speaker
- (.) Short untimed pause
- text Speaker emphasis

Punctuation is given for ease of reading rather than to indicate speech patterns.

Appendix 7

Additional transcription symbols used in Chapter 7

The transcription notation in this chapters is a simplified version of that developed by Gail Jefferson (see Atkinson and Heritage, 1984b for a more detailed description).

- (0.2) The number in brackets indicates a time gap within one speaker's talk or between speakers estimated in tenths of a second.
- .hhh A dot before an 'h' indicates speaker in-breath.
- hhh An 'h' indicates out-breath, the more 'h's the longer the breath.
- = The equals sign indicates that there is no interval between adjacent utterances.
- co:lon A colon indicates an extension of the sound or syllable it follows.
- °text° Degree signs indicate that the talk they encompass is noticeably quieter than the surrounding talk.
- [] Square brackets placed at the same position in lines above and below of different speakers indicate overlapping speech between the brackets.
- A single hyphen indicates a halting cutoff. When multiple hyphens are used after several words as in 'wh- wh- how-' the speech has a stammering quality.

Appendix 8

Sarah

1	Jill	Okay. Um (.) I'd like if you can to say
2		something about, it's a sort of sketch
3		rather than a sort of detailed history
4		(laughs) that I'm looking for, and really
5		around the sort of point that women
6		sometimes find it difficult to say wh (.)
7		I mean, I think you said you have made
8		choices, so what sort of choices have you
9		made, what people have there been in the
10		course of your life that you've been close
11		to and that (.) how do you explain it to
12		yourself?
13	Sarah	I have to tell you that, and it's fine to
14		tell you the detail, but I think this is
15		what sort of explains it for me. I
16		actually lost my brother when I was 21 so
17		er, somewhat tragically, so that was a
18		major influence for me in terms of my,
19		certainly all of my twenties. So the men
20		that I went out with, I mean I went a bit
21		mad really I think, in retrospect, but I
22		went travelling, I went out with loads of
23		guys, was not interested in (.) long-term
24		relationships; there was no way I was ever
25		going to be close to anyone, so I think,
26		you know, that's, that was very
27		influential (.) and has been, I think, in
28		many respects um (.) ongoingly. I mean, I
29		think that, you know, probably it's more
30		in its place now than it's ever been (.)
31		which is why I feel probably better now
32		emotionally than I've ever been, but, um,
33		so I think that (.) that in terms of
34		people I chose to (.) have as partners and
35		relationships then (.) were short-term,
36		you know, no threat people really; great
37		time but nothing else. So, and then in my
38		thirt I mean I can see it in decades
39		almost really, in, in my thirties I
40		started going out with people for longer
41		and (.) um I suppose it's timing really.
42		I mean that's how I would see that, you
43		know, there were some people I wasn't
44		ready for and some people who weren't
45		ready for me really in terms of (.) what
46		you wanted out of your life; whether you
47		wanted to have kids, set- you know, live
48		with somebody etc. and, um (.) I certainly
49		think of my thirties there was one person
50		I met in my thirties who probably the only
51		person I would have (.) actually married;
52		I mean marriage has never been
53		particularly an issue but he is somebody
54		that probably I, I would have married but,
55		you know, it didn't work out; we were in

56 different places really. Um, and it's got
 57 better each decade actually. My forties
 58 were, I was much more together, um (.) and
 59 made, I suppose that's when I made the
 60 sort of most together choices of leaving a
 61 relationship I'd been in for a while
 62 because, I just felt that wasn't right for
 63 me really and that felt like a major step
 64 for me, to not just be batting around, you
 65 know, letting things happen to me really.
 66 Um, and, I've only just become 50 so for
 67 fifties, who knows? But um, certainly
 68 this relationship I'm in now is very
 69 different and I think I'm um more balanced
 70 in it really in terms of I feel quite
 71 calm about what's going, I feel much more
 72 centred in myself I suppose is what it's
 73 about and he's very different than a lot
 74 of people I've been out with. So, so I
 75 do, I do see it in these blocks (laughs)
 76 of, sort of, time, of me, no, meeting some
 77 nice people but timing being (.) you know,
 78 me wanting at certain points to (.) be
 79 living with somebody and having kids when
 80 they weren't ready for that and (.) and
 81 also times when I've, you know, I've not
 82 been ready for it and I've met people that
 83 wanted it. So, yeah, timing.

84 Jill

Right.

85 Sarah

But I do think my brother's death actually
 86 has had a major influence in me not
 87 actually 'settling', for want of a better
 88 word, with somebody.

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